

FILM

REVIEWS

Closer

Mike Nichols miraculously manages to improve on Patrick Marber's brilliant play by bringing it to the big screen.

The longtime director—who's been flying high lately with *The Birdcage* and *Angels in America* (and please give *What Planet Are You From?* another chance)—bravely challenges the audience by focusing exclusively on four partner-swapping characters over a four-year period: Dan the failed writer (Jude Law), Larry the dermatologist (Clive Owen), Anna the photographer (Julia Roberts) and Alice the stripper (Natalie Portman).

(Dan makes ends meet by writing about dead people. In one of the film's lighter moments, he reveals that the phrase "he enjoyed his privacy" is obit code for "raging queen.")

*Closer* leaps through time, jumping ahead months in an instant, but always giving viewers the benefit of the doubt that they can keep up with the suddenly shifting scenarios.

The sex is shockingly frank—but it's even more effective because it's done entirely through dialogue, not nudity. (Can you believe the word "perineum" appears in the film that's sure to land Nichols his first Best Director Oscar since *The Graduate*?)

But this is far from lewd fluff. These characters personify the life struggles we all deal with: truth vs. lies, kindness vs. cruelty, happiness vs. depression.

The most exciting aspect of the project is that it marks a new artistic peak for Diane Sawyer's hubby—more than 38 years after he helmed *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

This late-career zenith is something *Closer* shares with 2004's other best films: After 29 years in Hollywood, Dennis Quaid deserves an Academy Award for *In Good Company* (opening Jan. 14), and Virginia Madsen kicks ass in *Sideways* (now playing) 21 years after debuting in Rob Lowe's *Class*. It's a pretty damn inspiring trend.

In fact, the three pics have something else in common: They all focus on the struggles between two emotionally engaged men—a real rarity at the movies.

Will we look back on these post-election films as the dawn of The New Honesty in cinema? Perhaps. Dan sums it up best by sharing his sudden urge to tell the truth: "I'm addicted to it—because without it, we're animals." **A+**

—Jim Radosta



Closer to fine: Jude and Julia

I ♥ Huckabees

A beleaguered environmentalist (Jason Schwartzman) seeks the aid of an "existential detective" couple (Lily Tomlin and Dustin Hoffman) when he's usurped by a corporate hack (Jude Law) representing the allegedly philanthropic interests of the Wal-Mart-like Huckabees chain. It's corporations vs. human beings and positive vs. negative metaphysics, which sounds like a recipe for heavy-handedness, but writer/director David O. Russell (*Flirting with Disaster*) has created a charming, insinuating political/philosophical comedy that, by the end, reaches a peak of poignant subtlety. **A-**

—Christopher McQuain

The Incredibles

Pixar takes animation to the next level of jaw-dropping awesomeness with yet another highly marketable movie aimed at both kids and their parents. The premise: Mr. Incredible and his family (Elastigirl, Violet Girl and Dash Dash) are repressed superheroes, stuffing their fantastical powers away to please the rest of the world. Sarah Vowell pulls off a particularly hilarious voice-over as the insecure daughter with a closet of black clothes and an even blacker mood. **A-**

—Cori Taratoot

Team America: World Police

*South Park* masterminds Trey Parker and Matt Stone have outdone themselves in this

sharp spoof of action-adventure clichés and the war on terrorism. Queers will especially appreciate the film's mockery of Hollywood liberals in the Film Actors Guild, or F.A.G., as well as the lengths (ahem) that our hero, Gary, will take to rid the planet of bad guys. Oh, and did I mention it's all done with marionettes? **A-**

—JR

Vera Drake

In Mike Leigh's latest, set in postwar London, Imelda Staunton plays a wife, mother and housecleaner with an endless capacity for helping those in need, a generosity that extends to performing then-illegal abortions for young women too poor or frightened to go elsewhere. Not a single quietly devastating detail is spared in depicting Vera's wrenching downfall. Leigh's gracefully confident, matter-of-fact style evades mawkishness and showcases some exceedingly fine performances. **A-**

—CM

The Yes Men

A brilliant documentary about a group of activists whose M.O. is to impersonate World Trade Organization representatives and other crooked businesspeople for the purpose of making the world a kinder, gentler place. Also in their repertoire: switching the voice boxes of Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls. (Imagine children all over town getting G.I. Joes that exclaim, "I love shopping with you!") You'll fall off your seat laughing. **A**

—J.B. Rabin

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