

film

Amazing Grace

Although it's legitimate to question whether William Wilberforce was really the utterly selfless saint depicted in *Amazing Grace*, such doubts ultimately disintegrate in the face of such a brilliantly executed film. Like a great biography, it takes you on a journey through time and into a remarkable person's life, leaving you teary-eyed but inspired. Younger leads Ioan Gruffudd and Romola Garai hold their own alongside wizened masters Albert Finney and Michael Gambon. The period dress and décor are delightful, as are all the scenes of the bewigged-and-powdered representatives bandying words in Parliament. See this film. **A**

—Tony le Tigre

Black Snake Moan

A nymphomaniacal sex abuse survivor (Christina Ricci) gets thrown out of a truck one night by a redneck. The next morning a blues musician/farmer (Samuel L. Jackson) finds her lying half-naked in the road and chains her to his radiator to cleanse her of her wicked ways. Depending on your politics, Craig Brewer's follow-up to *Hustle & Flow* is either a harmless guilty pleasure or a big ol' slice of Southern-fried horse shit with toxic traces of misogyny and racism. Jackson makes the most of the hammy script, but Ricci fails to strike a convincing balance between *Little Girl Lost* and *Girl Gone Wild*. **C**

—Stephen Blair

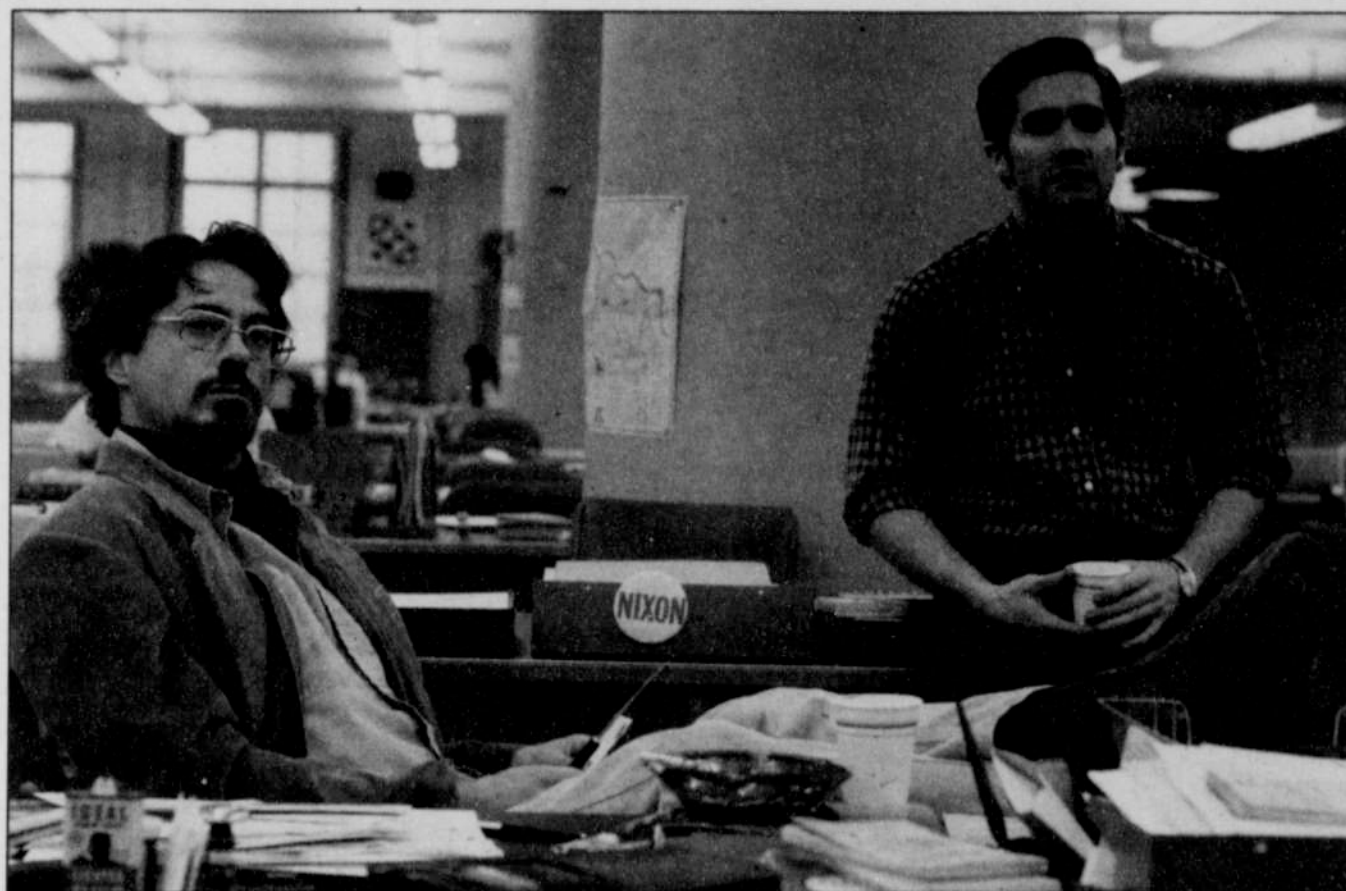
Cautiva

Gaston Biraben's feature debut tells the story of a teenage girl (exceptionally portrayed by Barbara Lombardo) who learns in 1994 that she is one of the "missing children" of Argentina's "dirty war" and that her real mother was one of the "disappeared" 14 years earlier for criticizing the political regime of the time. A judge directs her to live with her biological grandmother, and she cannot return to the only family she has ever known. This emotionally powerful story is a mix of documentary and political thriller told entirely from the girl's point of view. Opens March 2 at Hollywood Theatre. **A**

—Yvonne P. Behrens

The Dead Girl

Nominated for three Independent Spirit Awards including Best Feature, this is a bleak and generally effective psychological drama from writer/director Karen Moncrieff (*Blue Car*). Broken into five distinct sections with changing points of view, the story opens with the discovery of a mur-



Robert Downey Jr. (left) and Jake Gyllenhaal track the *Zodiac* killer in David Fincher's latest thriller.

dered woman (Brittany Murphy) and ends with a sequence about her final hours. Murphy's reckless performance comes off as a bad Courtney Love imitation, but the rest of the acting is top-notch. The formidable ensemble includes Toni Collette, Mary Steenburgen, James Franco, Mary Beth Hurt, Piper Laurie and Giovanni Ribisi. **B+**

—SB

Ghost Rider

One of the comic book world's most enduring anti-establishment anti-heroes is Ghost Rider, he of the flaming skull, radical motorcycle and "feel the pin of your bad deeds" penance stare. Translated to film, the Rider is embodied by Nicolas Cage, who does a credible job riding the line between action and silliness. The occasional moments of humor actually help liven the film up, though both lead villains (Mephistopheles is played by Peter Fonda) are a bit dead. While you'll cheer over most of the special effects—the real star of the film—you'll leave the theater thinking it was all a little bit "born to be mild" and could have been better. **B-**

—Andy Mangels

The Lives of Others

Winner of Best Foreign Film honors at the Academy Awards, this is a bleak and compelling feature debut from writer/director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. In East Berlin in the mid-1980s, a secret service agent finds himself emotionally entangled in the lives of the politically subver-

sive artists he's spying on. The acting is solid, and the suspense builds to a nail-biting climax. The conclusion, alas, is tedious and mushy. **B+**

—SB

Matthew Barney: No Restraint

Director Alison Chernick provides a handsome, if superficial, documentary of the making of *Cremaster Cycle* artist Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9*, a work that manages to be both opaque and viscerally understandable to anyone who has fought in the trenches of postmodern academic art theory. For the fortunate souls who've escaped that experience, *Matthew Barney: No Restraint* is only a documentary about the production of a staggeringly expensive art film, glimpsed only in snippets. Most of the entertainment comes from whatever baffling garments Barney's partner and collaborator Björk is wearing, and video clips from Barney's freakishly all-American, wholesome Idaho adolescence. Opens March 3 at Hollywood Theatre. **C-**

—Jemiah Jefferson

Reno 911!: Miami

What happens when the dumbest sheriff's deputies of Reno get put in charge of Miami's policing (thanks to a bio-attack at a law enforcement convention)? A whole lot of inappropriate behavior, whale guts, a significant amount of same-sex attraction and nudity, a Scarface wannabe with a weed-whacker, and the lewd acts of roller-skating gay hustler Terry and his father (a surprise cameo). Comedy

Central's hilarious show is seamlessly translated to the screen with bigger budget and bigger giggles. (Stick around for the end of the credits.) If you don't leave this movie laughing, you should be arrested. **A**

—AM

Seraphim Falls

Director David Von Ancken's epic drama is set in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Col. Morsman Carver (Liam Neeson) has only one thought: to hunt down Gideon (Pierce Brosnan) and kill him no matter what it takes. *Seraphim Falls* is done in the tradition of great Westerns, but it's sometimes a little too violent, and the filmmakers could have told us earlier in the story why Carver seeks revenge. Neeson and Brosnan deliver wonderful character studies, and the movie has several cameos, including the beautiful Angelica Huston. Brilliant cinematography by Jon Toll (*Legends of the Fall*) of the landscape of the West, partially filmed at Oregon's McKenzie River and Sahalie Falls. **B**

—YPB

Zizek!

The exclamation mark after this film's title is cute but unnecessary; its subject, Slovenian "academic rock star" Slavoj Zizek, is dramatic enough without it. Zizek, the subject of a long profile in *The New Yorker* a while back, holds nothing back in this engaging documentary. He's a disheveled-looking genius, adored by students, who pontificates madly on everything from psychoanalytic theory to leftist politics. Not to worry, though: He's so hypergabby and charismatic, he makes it all exciting and even, occasionally, intelligible. It doesn't hurt that he's happy to turn his sardonic gaze on himself. *Zizek!* is a loving tribute to an eccentric intellectual who can dazzle and disturb in the same sentence. Now playing at Living Room Theaters. **B+**

—Gary Morris

Zodiac

It's rare to see a fact-based film about a sensationalized murder case that doesn't choose sides, but *Zodiac* not only doesn't lay blame on the killer—who was never identified, it also presents its heroes in sometimes less-favorable light. Still, at almost three hours, and with bravura director David Fincher doing almost zero stylistic flourishes, this slow-going film might have you checking your watch. As for queer content, Jake Gyllenhaal is excellent as always, and Armistead Maupin gets name-checked, but San Francisco seems once again gay-free.... **B**

—AM **10**

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