

film

Commune

This intriguing documentary profiles one of the counterculture's crown jewels: California's Black Bear Commune, a "free space for free people" that started in the 1960s. The film features the disparate types who pioneered it—hippies, artists, labor organizers, orgy fans—in rare vintage footage and contemporary interviews. Alas, there's not a scintilla of gayness: These "free people" who slept with a different person every two nights were sadly conventional in this respect. Opens March 24 at Hollywood Theatre. **B+**

—Gary Morris

Gray Matters

Writer/director Sue Kramer's feature debut just might be one of those low-budget surprise successes that comes out of nowhere. This romantic comedy set in Manhattan has all the right ingredients, including references to my favorite movies from the '40s. The story is simple: Gray (Heather Graham) and Sam (Tom Cavanagh) are siblings who are so compatible that strangers think they are dating, which forces them to make an extra effort to go out and find Mr. and Mrs. Right. It gets complicated when Sam meets Charlie (Bridget Monahan) and Gray ends up falling in love with her, too. The movie is part screwball, part musical and strikes a wonderful balance between sweet and funny. The chemistry among all of the actors is really good, and the film has an absolutely fabulous supporting cast featuring Sissy Spacek, Alan Cumming and, for all you fans of *The L Word*, Rachel Shelley. A delightful film for all ages. **A**

—Yvonne P. Behrens

The Host

If you only see one movie this year about a huge river monster that comes on land to devour people, make it this thrilling and inventive import from South Korea. A cheeky critique of American environmental policies, it shows how the ferocious mutant owes its life to a U.S. Army base that dumped dusty bottles of formaldehyde down the drain. Director Jooh-ho Bong strikes a perfect balance between scares and laughs, drawing inspiration from legitimate horror classics like *Alien* and schlocky B movies like *The Blob*. **A**

—Stephen Blair



A woman (Heather Graham, right) falls for her brother's girlfriend (Bridget Monahan, left) in the screwball comedy *Gray Matters*.

Miss Potter

Your enjoyment of this biopic of legendary children's book creator Beatrix Potter will depend solely on your tolerance level for quaint, tea-cozy movies and the squinty-faced, damp-eyed mannerisms of the movie's executive producer and star, Renée Zellweger. There is much to admire in Chris Noonan's affectionate film—the lovely, pastoral production design, a fine supporting cast of charming English actors, the clever use of whimsical animation to bring Potter's little furry friends to life—but, unfortunately, Miss Zellweger is front and center the entire time delivering a most insufferable performance. Wriggling her cute little bunny nose, squinching up her dried-apple doll face, mumbling about in her carefully studied Devonshire cream dialect and crying at the drop of a treacle tart, she manages to make one want to throw her a box of Kleenex and run from the room.

Potter was an intriguing character. A mix of proto-feminism and early-nature-conservatism, she deserves more of a detailed portrait than this twee "family" film with its ham-fisted screenplay (if you can't tell the delightful Ewan McGregor might not make it all the way to the end of the film, then you haven't been watching movies for the past 60 years) and reliance on swatches of pastoral music and postcard-pretty views to manufacture emotion.

There was a bit more to Potter than Peter Rabbit, but you wouldn't know it from here. With a more intelligent screenplay and another actress in the role (it's fun to imagine what the fascinating Emily Watson would have done with the part—but then we would miss her wide-eyed, manically repressed spinster that gives the movie its touch of bitter energy), this might have been a fascinating look at a true original, instead of a pallid watercolor reproduction. **C**

—Jon Kretzu

300

King Leonides (a tasty Gerard Butler) marshals his band of Spartans against an overwhelming hoard of invading Persians led by Xerxes. Much repetitive bloodshed and violence ensues. Adapted from a graphic novel, 300 is visually stunning, like a sepia-toned *Pierre et Gilles* illustration come to life. But despite the also-stunning array of nearly naked men and the homoerotic undertones that carries—and the historical fact ignored here that many Spartan soldiers were gay lovers—300 is not queer-friendly: The only explicit gay reference is a negative one; effeminate Xerxes, who constantly commands Leonides to kneel before him, is a drag-queen-like villain; naked lesbians and hermaphrodites are shown to illustrate how perverse Xerxes is; and, as if to displease bears in the crowd, only the villains and

old Senate members have any body hair. Additionally, the dialogue induces cringing at times, and the narration is abominable. Perhaps 300 would best be seen wearing earplugs; as a silent film, it would be a wonder to behold. **B-**

—Andy Mangels

Where's Molly

This is a heartbreaking but fascinating and ultimately heartwarming locally produced documentary about a man's search for his developmentally disabled sister, removed from her family and committed to an institution for the "feeble-minded" in the early 1950s, when a combination of medical ignorance and social distaste effectively imprisoned these children for life and devastated families. Director Jeff Daly combines old photos, contemporary interviews, home movies from his childhood and chilling educational films to shape his depiction of a dark family history—and a ray of hope that he will someday be reunited with his beloved sister. Now playing at Living Room Theaters. **A-**

—Jemiah Jefferson

White Shadows

Celebrity hairstylist Dalee Henderson, who created Diana Ross' iconic diva coiffure, is the subject of this loving, sometimes inspiring, sometimes aggravating documentary. A longtime AIDS survivor now dying, Henderson unsparingly probes his own life in the limelight and out. A magnetic, beatific presence, he is helped in this often unforgettable portrait by a web of devoted friends. The only real downer is director Mialynn Hanna's decision to film, at agonizing length, every "I've fallen and I can't get up" moment her subject experiences, pulling the film into bathos. It's not easy—or even enlightening, at this point—to listen to 10-minute anecdotes about Henderson's AIDS-related incontinence. Screens March 30 at the 2007 Longbaugh Film Festival; for details visit www.longbaugh.com. **B+**

—GM 10

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