

Age gets it right. Director Shekhar Kapur takes a fairly stylized approach to the material, adding a mix of feminist empowerment (and feminine loneliness), overblown sea battles, sexual tension and political intrigue. Fantastic performances from Clive Owens, Geoffrey Rush, Abbie Cornish, Rhys Ifans and Samantha Morton anchor the film, but it's really all about Cate Blanchett. She makes this 16th century figure into a living, breathing human being, knocking out an Oscar-worthy performance in an otherwise fluffy movie. And, of course, the costumes are amazing. Great fun. **A**

—Jemiah Jefferson

Into the Wild

Sean Penn finally hits his stride as a director with this thoroughly engrossing biopic about a recent college graduate (Emile Hirsch, delivering a remarkable performance reminiscent of River Phoenix) who sells all of his possessions and drops out of society to roam across the continent, meeting a string of richly drawn characters along the way. On the surface it would seem that the outspoken liberal filmmaker has steered clear of politics here, but in reality his protagonist's inner/outer journey makes a radically anti-American statement: Put simply, the best things in life are not things. **A+**

—Jim Radosta

Michael Clayton

Just when it seemed like intelligence and subtlety had been banished from Hollywood films, along comes a gripping and complex legal thriller that delivers plenty of suspense without resorting to hammy courtroom melodrama. George Clooney plays the title character, a recovering gambling addict who does dirty deeds for a major New York City law firm until a colleague's mental breakdown and a corporation's foul sportsmanship cause him to question his ethics. Tony Gilroy—who wrote the screenplays for all three *Bourne* movies—shows great promise in his directorial debut, drawing remarkable performances from Clooney, Tilda Swinton and Tom Wilkinson. **A-**

—SB

The Nightmare Before Christmas in 3-D

Tim Burton's stop-motion masterpiece about Jack Skellington's desire to turn Halloween into Christmas is familiar enough to audiences, given that it's 14 years old. Now Disney is rereleasing the film in "Digital 3-D," in the hopes of scaring up new audience dollars. The obvious question: Does the 3-D work? Yes indeed, although some scenes are better than others, and few have quite the level of depth that the pre-film 3-D trailers do. Also, the glasses are a bit small for adult heads and tough for those who already wear glasses to don. But this is a swell comeback for a cool film. **A**

—Andy Mangels

Rendition

South African director Gavin Hood follows his Oscar-winning *Tsotsi* with a limp thriller that doesn't build any momentum until it's too late to care what happens. Reese Witherspoon makes us long for her peppy *Legally Blonde* days with her tired portrayal of an American woman whose Egyptian-born husband (the gorgeous Omar Metwally) gets detained and tortured by the CIA on the suspicion that he's affiliated with terrorists. Jake Gyllenhaal plays a CIA analyst who undergoes an ethical crisis as he monitors the torture sessions. Most of dialogue is so corny that even Meryl Streep looks ridiculous in the role of a CIA heavy with a menacing Southern drawl. **C**

—SB

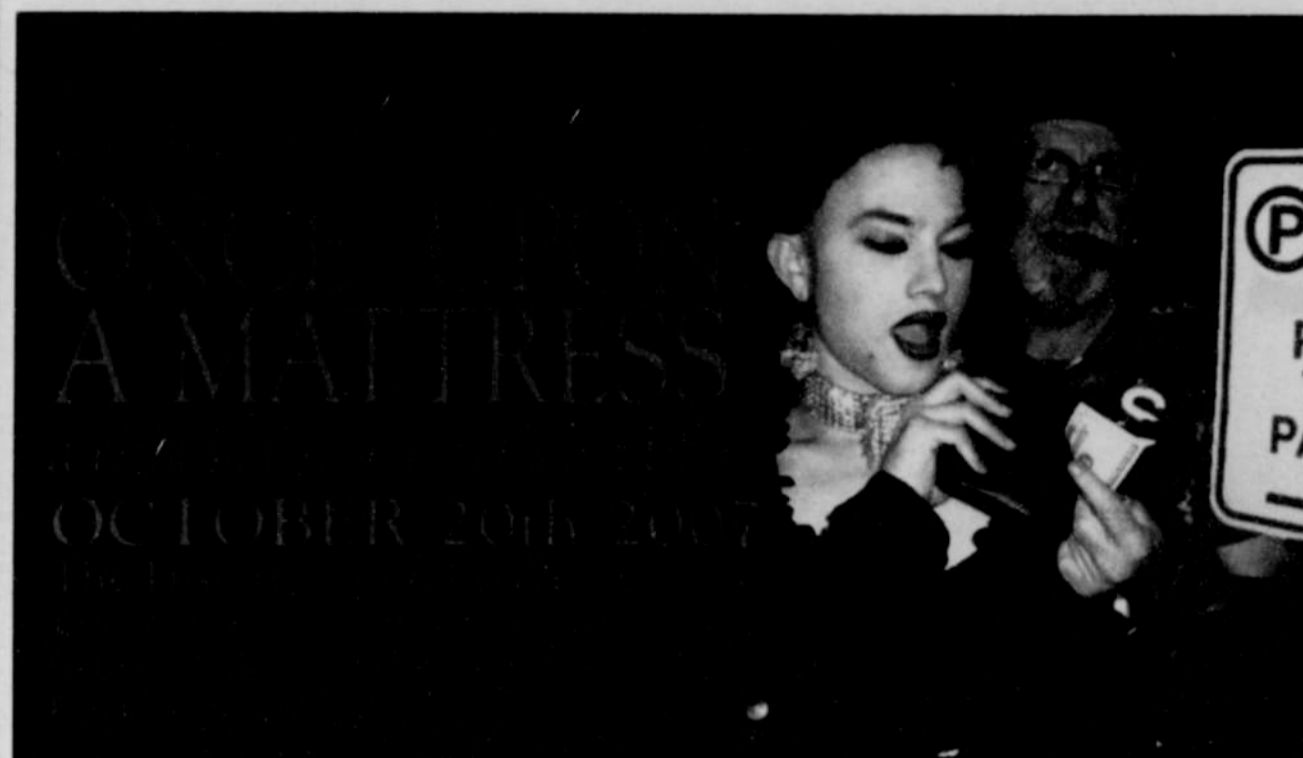
Things We Lost in the Fire

It's a Hallmark card for a heroin addict. Halle Berry and David Duchovny play an unconvincing couple with adorable afro'd children whose domestic bliss is cut short when he dies chivalrously defending a woman's honor from her armed and abusive husband. The woman then invites her late husband's best friend, a recovering junkie played by Benicio del Toro, to stay with her, the reasons for which are not entirely clear. The mostly excellent acting is nullified by a predictable and exaggerated script and a story about as compelling as a bag of sawdust. **B**

—Tony LeTigre



Jake Gyllenhaal plays a CIA analyst who undergoes an ethical crisis as he monitors torture sessions in *Rendition*.



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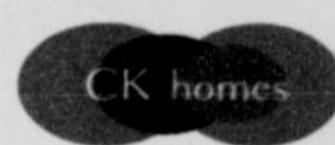
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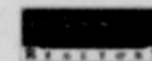
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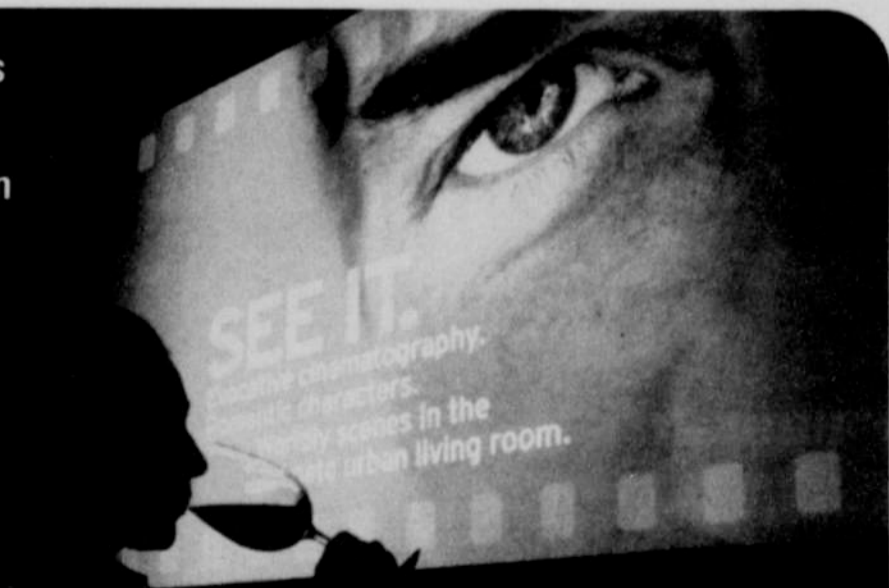
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