

film

Alvin and the Chipmunks

You don't go to a movie called *Alvin and the Chipmunks* expecting Jean-Luc Godard, or even Judd Apatow, so it's a little tough to seriously criticize this innocuous yet insidious marketing-scheme-in-the-form-of-a-Christmas-stocking-stuffer. Suffice it to report that the little CGI chipmunks are sufficiently adorable (although after a short while they started to really creep me out); Jason Lee spends nearly the entire film trying so hard to look earnest that he ends up resembling an overworked children's dentist; David Cross (of *Mr. Show* and *Arrested Development* fame) made me laugh a few times doing his satire of an evil record producer; and the large audience of toddlers at the press screening laughed a few more times than I did. If you're desperate to hear chipmunk-chirping, kindergarten hip-hop versions of "The Christmas Song," "Witch Doctor" and, God help us all, "Funky Town," this is your movie. **B** (if you're 8 and younger) **C-** (for all other ages)

—Jon Kretzu

The Golden Compass

This beautifully filmed, well-acted adaptation of Philip Pullman's speculative fantasy novel is another victim of the difficulty of adapting a subtle, complex novel to cinema—namely, the thoughtful nuance of that anti-authoritarian young-adult sci-fi adventure is set aside in favor of showy visuals and simple, straightforward characterizations. Our adolescent heroine Lyra is plucky and fearless; Mrs. Coulter (skillfully, inevitably portrayed by Nicole Kidman) is elegantly terrifying; there are flying witches, pirates and animal companions; and the Kingdom of the Bears is full of serious ass-kicking. In that—and the visuals and story remain brilliant—it's flashy, breathless fun. **B**

—Jemiah Jefferson

The Great Debaters

This movie is based on the true story of Melvin B. Tolson, a professor at Wiley College Texas in the 1930s rural South. Denzel Washington directs and stars as Tolson, who formed a debaters club that went on to challenge Harvard with the help of a minister (Forest Whitaker). The unbelievable happens, and for the next 10 years the club wins the national challenge. This is a great, inspirational history piece that makes you think a lot about what and if things have changed. **A**

—Yvonne P. Behrens

I Am Legend

Will Smith stars solo, alongside a dog, for about 70 percent of this film about a scientist who might be the last human alive in New York...except for some pesky vampirelike cannibals. Smith plays the role excellently, slipping between a serious search for a cure and the kind of madness that years of isolation might engender. The creatures are a bit too computer-generated, but there are a number of good scares all around. Dog lovers will have a tough time with one scene, however. **B+**

—Andy Mangels

Juno

Like an Internet-age version of Lana Turner being discovered outside Schwab's Drug Store back in the '30s, Diablo Cody was just an ex-stripper-turned-blogger until her serial posts caught the attention of a Los Angeles manager who helped her get a book published and encouraged her to work up a screenplay. The result is *Juno*, a film that's already being called this year's *Little Miss Sunshine*. Cody's script gives star Ellen Page and the entire cast a gold mine of material, and everyone gets a few good scenes. Thankfully, the film avoids being a pro-life morality tale dipped in hipster attitude. My only complaint is that—with its oh-so-indie soundtrack and relentlessly slick dialogue peppered with novelty slang—it's maybe a little *too* hip. **A-**

—Tony LeTigre

King of California

Michael Douglas stars as an excessively bearded, wild-eyed man newly released from a mental institution attempting to pick up where he left off with his 17-year-old daughter (played by Marilyn Manson's old lady, Evan Rachel Wood.) Except that he seems less interested in repairing that damaged relationship than in using every means at his disposal—including selling his daughter's car and hocking his own most prized musical instrument—to pursue an insane quest for treasure supposedly buried beneath a Costco on the outskirts of the city. The strong performances and lively soundtrack don't quite bring to life the wooden script, although you can't help being moved by the ending. Now playing at Living Room Theaters. **B**

—TL

The Kite Runner

Fans of Khaled Hosseini's best seller will not be disappointed by this faithful adaptation. Like the book, the film is alternately fascinating and mov-

Johnny Depp gives Alan Rickman "the closest shave you'll ever know" in *Sweeney Todd*.

ing, but is also rendered in the same deliberate, measured pace as the prose. Director Marc Forster (*Finding Neverland*) and writer David Benioff (*25th Hour*) deliberately downplay the story's inherent suspense, and the actors speak so softly they are often drowned out by the clicking of the projector. But *The Kite Runner* visits a world we need to understand. **B**

—Floyd Sklover

National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets

Nicolas Cage (having a bad hair color day) returns as treasure hunter Benjamin Franklin Gates, who is determined to discover the secret behind Abraham Lincoln's assassination. This entertaining but quite predictable conspiracy theory adventure features great action scenes and a nice ending, leaving chances for another sequel. The strong supporting cast includes Jon Voight, Helen Mirren, Ed Harris and Harvey Keitel. **B**

—YPB

P.S. I Love You

Based on a novel by Cecelia Ahern, this romantic comedy directed by Richard LaGravenese (*Freedom Writers*) is definitely a tearjerker chick flick—but a beautiful one. Hilary Swank and Gerard Butler star as a happily married couple, until suddenly Butler dies and leaves Swank a widow. With a little help from her friends (Lisa Kudrow and Gina Gershon) and some messages from her dead husband, Swank finds her way back to life after the tragedy. Grab your Kleenex box. **B+**

—YPB

The Savages

This depressing comedy deals with the inescapable dual tragedy of aging and having to deal with it. As a painfully real pair of intellectually advanced, emotionally recessive siblings, two of our finest American actors—Laura Linney and Philip Seymour Hoffman—manage to traverse a delicate tightrope between subtle heartbreak and mordant humor. The result—abetted by the beautiful supporting work of Philip Bosco as the

pair's dementia-ridden father and Tamara Jenkins' pitch-perfect direction and screenplay—is a haunting work suffused with both aching laughter and quiet anguish. Opens Dec. 25. **A**

—JK

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street

Tim Burton's film of Stephen Sondheim's modern masterpiece is surprising for many reasons. Burton (along with David Lynch) is one of contemporary cinema's most unique visual stylists, but who would have thought he would create a film adaptation as respectful of the composer's original vision and mood. Collaborating once again with his artistic muse, Johnny Depp, he veers away from camp and delves into the bleak, disturbing heart of the piece, creating a work of savage beauty.

Depp's mordant lost soul is surrounded by an impeccable cast, with especially strong work from Alan Rickman as a viscous villain, newcomer Ed Sanders as Sweeney's innocent apprentice (one of Burton's masterstrokes is casting a Dickensian waif in this role) and Helena Bonham Carter as an unexpectedly realistic and moving Mrs. Lovett. From the dazzling production design and cinematography to the sumptuous soundscape, gruesome *Grand Guignol* effects and rhythmic editing, Burton has created an artistic work that is both a symbiotic visual extension of Sondheim's perversely gorgeous score and a haunting masterpiece that stands proudly on its own merits. **A**

—JK

The Water Horse: Legend of the Deep

Remember those Disney animal movies like *Oscar*, *the Ormery Ocelot* or *Wally, the Wildcat Who Lost His Whistle*? Substitute a CGI Loch Ness monster and match him up with a sweet though awfully wan little Scottish boy and you pretty much have *The Water Horse*. This interminable boy-and-his-sea-serpent movie features some gorgeous scenery and little else, save a totally wasted cast of good actors (Emily Watson and Brian Cox among them) having to deal with lots of high jinks involving Nessie destroying kitchens, bathrooms and dinner parties. After the 500th shot of the title character rearing up out of the Loch with a triumphantly yelping laddie on his scaly back, you will begin to yearn for a repeat of *Roscoe, the Wretched Raccoon*. Opens Dec. 25. **C-**

—JK 10

Ellen Page and Michael Cera portray teen parents in *Juno*.