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film

Academy Award Nominated Short Films

If you need guidance for this year's Oscar predictions, here is a rare opportunity to view the contenders in two of the most obscure categories. Live Action Shorts include Italy's "The Substitute," about a teacher who terrorizes a high school classroom, and Belgium's "Tanghi Argentini," about a man who begs a co-worker to teach him the tango in two weeks, hiding his ulterior motives. Animated Shorts include France's "Even Pigeons Go to Heaven," about an old man who is fooled into buying a machine that will transport him to Shangri-la, and Canada's "I Met the Walrus," which illustrates a 14-year-old's brief yet deep 1969 interview with John Lennon. Opens Feb. 15 at Hollywood Theatre. **A**

—Jim Radosta

The Band's Visit

A fictional Egyptian police orchestra gets stuck overnight in a bleak Israeli village en route to an Arab Cultural Center in this quirky, heartwarming film by first-time director Eran Kolirin. Despite vast cultural differences, the peeved musicians and the bored locals form unexpected connections during their brief time together. Opens Feb. 22. **A**

—JR

Charlie Bartlett

Charlie Bartlett is part Ferris Bueller and part Max Fischer of *Rushmore*, but Anton Yelchin's performance infuses him with such madcap charm and empathy, he comes across more likable than either. The high schooler's desire to achieve iconic popularity drives him to criminal lengths—manufacturing fake IDs, selling the drugs he gets from his prescription-happy psychiatrist to troubled kids—and his life is filled with people who rely on him to solve their problems: not only his fellow students but his principal (a not-quite-recovered addict played with anhedonic authority by Robert Downey Jr.), as well as his medicated and pixilated mother, who does an awful lot of "wine tasting." Ultimately we see that Charlie is no less desperate for answers than the flocks of people who come to him in search of them, and the film's abiding sweetness wins the day. Opens Feb. 22. **A-**

—Tony LeTigre

Fool's Gold

Flee the dreary weather and escape into tropical locations (Bahamas and Australia) in this romantic comedy directed by Andy Tennant (*Hitch*). Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson team up again (after 2003's *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*) to show off their incredible chemistry. McConaughey plays one of his typically charming, shirtless characters, treasure hunter Ben Finnegan, and Hudson is his estranged wife, who now works on a mega-yacht owned by a billionaire (superbly portrayed by Donald Sutherland), and the trio goes on a journey of adventure and slapstick. Hardly Oscar material, but a good date movie. **B-**

—Yvonne P. Behrens

Imagination

Surely there is an alternate universe in which a film like *Imagination* wins the Best Picture Oscar over far more predictable and pedestrian Hollywood fare. This beautiful experimental film, reportedly "mentored" by Czech surrealist master Jan Svankmajer, tells the story of twin teenage girls Anna and Sarah Woodruff and their benevolent neuro-psychologist, who becomes their unwitting benefactor in the wake of their mother's sudden death by earthquake. Anna is going blind and Sarah has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, and the film is stunningly effective in conveying to us the imaginary other-world the girls inhabit in their retreat from reality. Emerging writer/director Eric Leiser uses live action, stop-motion and clay animation, puppetry and odd camera angles to craft a vision that, on the most meager of budgets, dwarfs the creative innovation of films financed by mountains of gold. Opens Feb. 29 at Hollywood Theatre; Leiser will be in attendance on opening night. **A**

—TL

Jumper

A young man (Hayden Christensen) discovers he can teleport and uses his power to escape his dangerous home life. Years later, he learns that he's not alone in his ability and that a secret cabal known as "Paladins" hunt down and kill "Jumpers." Based on an excellent novel by Steven Gould, this film veers away from its source material and expands the storyline. Effects and stunt work are good, and the locations are stunning, but Samuel L. Jackson is tired as the lead Paladin, while Christensen is only marginally better than in the *Star Wars* films. Not a bad super-powered sci-fi film, but not great, either. **C+**

—Andy Mangels

Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037

You wouldn't think that a documentary about the assembly of a piano would make for compelling viewing, but this film proves otherwise. Through eye- and ear-opening interviews with burly craftsmen and meticulous musicians, even tone-deaf

viewers will gain a rich appreciation for the labor of love that's behind the process of creating each unique instrument. Opens Feb. 29 at Hollywood Theatre. **A**

—JR

Paranoid Park

Few U.S. directors have blazed a more unpredictable career path than Gus Van Sant.

After the indie sensation *Drugstore Cowboy* and the queer classic *My Own Private Idaho*, the gay Portland resident made a series of hit-or-miss Hollywood vehicles that ranged from the brilliant *To Die For* to the excruciatingly formulaic *Finding Forrester*.

Since 2002 he has stuck with low-budget experimental projects, yielding both stunning (*Elephant*) and numbing (*Last Days*) results. His latest, *Paranoid Park*, is a cross between *Crime and Punishment* and *Lords of Dogtown*, with a Portland teenage skate punk named Alex standing in for good ol' Raskolnikov.

Van Sant based his screenplay on a novel by Blake Nelson. The nonlinear story follows Alex in the aftermath of a train yard skirmish in which he accidentally causes a security guard's gruesome death by striking him with a skateboard.

Filmed at easily identifiable Portland locales like The House of Louis restaurant and the skate park underneath the east end of the Burnside Bridge, *Paranoid Park* employs a cast of unknowns. Van Sant tracked down some of the young actors with MySpace ads, and the resulting performances often spell out the risks inherent in this casting maneuver. Most of the acting is serviceable. It's just not memorable, and in some cases it's downright painful to watch the kids try so hard and fail to look cool and natural at the same time.

From a technical standpoint *Paranoid Park* is frequently impressive. In the skateboarding sequences, for instance, Van Sant achieves a hypnotic mood with slow-motion photography and dreamy electronica music by PDXer Ethan Rose. But eventually the film's formidable visual panache sticks out like a sore thumb because it's all in the service of a mediocre story about a bunch of uncharismatic brats. It's virtually impossible to muster concern for them.



Crime and Punishment meets *Lords of Dogtown* in gay Portland filmmaker Gus Van Sant's latest, *Paranoid Park*.