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FILM REVIEWS



FILM REVIEWS

Including Alpha Dog, God Grew Tired of Us and Black Gold

BY L.A. WEEKLY FILM CRITICS

Wednesday, January 10, 2007 - 6:00 pm

ALPHA DOG Hewing closely to the case of the San Fernando Valley drug dealer and petty thug Jesse James Hollywood (who made the FBI's most-wanted list at the tender age of 20), Alpha Dog follows Hollywood surrogate Johnny Truelove (Emile Hirsch) as he plots the kidnapping and eventual murder of a baby-faced teen (Anton Yelchin) whose Jewish skinhead half-brother (Ben Foster) owes Truelove an unpaid debt. But the abduction is a botch from the start, with the victim willingly submitting to his captors — happy to be freed from under the thumb of his overprotective mother (Sharon Stone) — and proceeding to spend the next several days getting high and getting laid in the company of his captors, before landing in a shallow grave. Part cruel story of anomic suburban youth, part alarmist parental cautionary tale, Alpha Dog exudes the lurid, stranger-than-fiction appeal of Bully and River's Edge and all those other ripped-from-the-headlines portraits of seemingly good, privileged kids gone very, very bad. Yet if the trappings sound familiar, the execution is anything but. In his best film to date, Nick Cassavetes (John Q, The Notebook) directs with ferocious energy, taking scenes past their logical stopping points and pushing his actors (particularly Foster, who can be as terrifying as Edward Norton in American History X) to, but never over, the precipice of absurdity. (Citywide) (Scott Foundas)



BLACK GOLD That four-dollar latte purchase of yours often yields little or almost nothing to the African bean harvesters who made it possible; sorry to harsh your buzz. No mere Western guilt-inducing harangue, this highly informative documentary by British brothers Marc and Nick Francis is a model of patient storytelling. Its calmly accumulated details of the cruelly exploitative global coffee trade pay off in sequences that juxtapose clueless U.S. caffeine peddlers and consumers with, for example, images of southern Ethiopian coffee-farm kids seeking scarce hospital care for their malnutrition. The doc's measured hope comes in the form of globetrotting union rep Tadesse Meskela, whose Oromo Coffee Farmers Co-op strives to circumvent stock-exchange price-fixing by working directly with fair-trade advocates who buy high-quality beans for something closer to what they're actually worth. Still, the filmmakers' inclusion of WTO "talks" that take place behind closed doors hardly minimizes the power of multinational java corporations or lets the latte-lover off the hook. No room for cream in Black Gold, but it does work as a wake-up call. (Grande 4-Plex) (Rob Nelson)

CODENAME: THE CLEANER A man who may or may not be a janitor wakes up in a fancy hotel, next to a dead FBI agent, with no memory of who he is or how he got there. Not a bad setup for a story, but unfortunately the man in question is played by Cedric the Entertainer, who has yet to do as his name suggests in a leading role. (Steven Seagal would have been funnier.) You wouldn't imagine that a man this overweight could elude his pursuers so easily, but Cedric gets some help from a butt-kicking babe (Lucy Liu) who may or may not be his girlfriend, and if you believe this pairing could plausibly happen, you might be gullible enough to buy a ticket to this movie. The most entertaining thing about Codename: The Cleaner certainly isn't Cedric — it's the way grainy stock footage of Seattle is intercut with what are clearly Vancouver locations. That, or the audacity with which plugs for Skittles and Quizno's have been liberally sprinkled throughout the dialogue. (Citywide) (Luke Y. Thompson)

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GO GOD GREW TIRED OF US Having endured civil war, separation from their families, a thousand-mile trek through sub-Saharan Africa and 10 years in a U.N. refugee camp while awaiting the myriad challenges of resettlement in the United States, the three “lost boys of Sudan” in *God Grew Tired of Us* can certainly withstand their sketchy portrayals in a borderline lazy but nonetheless compelling documentary. It’s only a slight exaggeration to say that *God Grew Tired of Us*, winner of two documentary prizes at last year’s Sundance, is another Hollywood gloss on human tragedy. In the tradition of Schindler’s List, the doc finds its none-too-inconvenient truth in the miraculous exception to the rule. Millions have died in the Sudanese war; only half of the 27,000 boys who fled southern Sudan in 1983 reached refuge in Kenya, where a small number were selected to emigrate to the United States. Of these, filmmaker Christopher Quinn chose three to follow — presumably on the basis of their potential to make it. As a work of documentary storytelling, Quinn’s film has nothing on 2003’s vastly superior *Lost Boys of Sudan*, whose poetic approach to the assimilation of its subjects is far less pushy in the quest for fish-out-of-water pathos and a happy ending. ([Sunset 5](#)) (Rob Nelson)

GO GURU The flamboyantly gifted Indian moviemaker Mani Ratnam has an epic romantic temperament, like a reform-minded 19th century novelist, with a great eye and a trunk full of Panavision lenses. In his most characteristic works, such as *Bombay* (1995) and *Dil Se (From the Heart)*, (2002), he places intimate personal stories at the eye of the storm in sweeping political and social dramas. Ratnam’s enthralling and eventful new picture, *Guru*, is one of his best yet; in fact it may be the best Indian commercial (“Bollywood”) movie since the Oscar-nominated *Lagaan* (2000). Inspired by the rags to riches story of a real-life Indian petrochemical tycoon, the late Dhirajlal “Dhirubhai” Ambani, it’s a realistically textured biographical thriller staged on an operatic scale. It aims at nothing less than the canonization of a new type of cultural icon for post-socialist India. Re-named Gurukant “Gurubhai” Desai and played with an exhilarating mixture of high-stepping enjoyment and focused determination by Abhishek Bachchan, the movie’s Ambani surrogate is a village boy who lays the groundwork for a huge company simply by pouncing on opportunities that others miss. We enjoy rooting for this enterprising businessman hero, and not just because we identify with the character’s delight at working out a clever new way to avoid paying excise taxes. He’s a hero not in spite of the fact that he’s a crafty corporate Capitalist but because of it — because his textile factories have created tens of thousands of jobs, and because the ordinary people he recruited as shareholders have been hoisted out of poverty by his success. Some elements of Desai’s story test positive for sentimentality, including his playful, ardent relationship with his plucky wife (Aishwarya Rai). The failure to make the private lives of the characters resonate with the main story is an unusual one for Ratnam, owing perhaps to his overriding drive to valorize *Guru* as a positive force in Indian public life. But the film is a triumph of casting: In a role that is often about the sheer steamrolling force of his character’s personality, Abhishek Bachchan’s attention to detail makes *Guru* accessible rather than intimidating, admirable but also plausible. In the end this *Guru* is just like one of us, only richer. ([Fallbrook 7](#); [Naz 8](#); [Laguna Hills 3](#)) (David Chute)

PRIMEVAL It’s more than a little deceptive to sell a film as a serial killer thriller when the murderer in question is a giant crocodile, and one who gets barely 10 minutes of screen time at that. Dominic Purcell, who’s like Jason Statham without the charisma, plays a disgraced reporter who travels to Africa alongside nature documentary Aviva (Brooke Langton, who’s like Eva Mendes without the hotness), Funny Black Guy cameraman Steve (Orlando Jones, who deserves better), and an ersatz Steve Irwin-type (Gideon Emery, dullsville). There, they learn that African life is hard, especially with warlords and oversized reptiles picking on everyone. With a little camp, this could have been fun — see *Lake Placid* or *Anaconda* — but even Jurgen Prochnow’s crazed Ahab wannabe is unfortunately understated, and despite an R rating, all the kills are glossed over in high-speed shaky-cam. ([Citywide](#)) (Luke Y. Thompson)

GO ROMÁNTICO If ever a life was defined by Sisyphean struggle it’s that of Carmelo, an itinerant mariachi who works San Francisco’s Mission District, cranking out melancholy love songs with his beloved but sporadically drunk partner, Arturo. Caught between dire poverty and the desire to keep his suffering family together, the 57-year-old Carmelo must choose between making \$100 on a good night in an American city and 30 pesos a day — an improvement on his hardscrabble childhood — servicing weddings in his down-at-heel Mexican town. Mark Becker spent more than three years following Carmelo back and forth, and the result is a rich, devastating portrait of a man gifted with great charm and burdened by the painful combination of determination and fatalism that so often comes with adversity. Inventively shot on 16 mm, *Romántico* echoes the changing rhythms of Carmelo’s world. If this terrific documentary doesn’t adjust your idea of what it means to have a hard life and a good attitude, you haven’t been paying attention. ([Nuart](#)) (Ella Taylor)



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STOMP THE YARD From the eardrum-shattering shout of “Attention!” that echoes over the opening logo through to the strobe-lit krump dancing contest that follows, the early scenes of *Stomp the Yard* are so loud and incoherent that they feel like punishment. After an equally incomprehensible street brawl, director Sylvain White pauses long enough to introduce his protagonist — DJ (Columbus Short), a talented young dancer incarcerated for his role in said brawl and, upon his release, shipped by his moms from South-Central to Atlanta’s ever-so-subtly-named Truth University (a fictional amalgam of prominent black colleges). There, DJ falls for a fine sister (Meagan Good), whose father — the dean of Truth — doesn’t look kindly on his little angel socializing with an ex-felon. What’s a brother to do? Why, put his fancy footwork to use in service of step-dancing competitions, a tradition at black fraternities and sororities, which, as filmed by White with an overload of slow-motion effects and high-speed shutters, are about as cinematic as a televised *Riverdance* concert. Newcomer Short has charisma, charm and athleticism to burn, but it’s mostly for naught in a movie that spends two tedious hours pulling out every stop in the gold-hearted-kid-from-the-wrong-side-of-the-tracks- meets-gold-hearted-girl-who-values-true-love-above-privilege playbook. (Citywide) (Scott Foundas)

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