



OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Bolt

This Disney animated feature tells the story of Bolt, a pumped-up little doggie whose TV star persona (should that be "canina"?) in an action show is a lot less real than he thinks. When he finds himself cast astray, the challenge is not only to adapt to the new world and his newfound physical limitations but also to find his true identity. Some have likened this well-received film to *The Truman Show* and doggone road epics like *Homeward Bound*, but the most fetching comparison that leaps to mind is *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, a tale of innocence supplanted that also ends with an action sequence in Hollywood. With the voices of John Travolta as Bolt, Miley Cyrus as his owner and Malcolm McDowell as the baddie. Screening in 3D at compatible theaters.



Transporter 3

Jason Statham is back in theaters as Frank Martin, the inscrutable deliveryman of choice for organized crime in Europe. In this entry, thugs kidnap the daughter of a Ukrainian environment official (Jeroen Krabbe from *The Fugitive*) to force him to do their bidding, and Statham is the man they turn to to keep her out of harm's way — for the time being. Natalya Rudakova, as the daughter, offers her services as the exotic but irritating female love interest that Taiwan's Shu Qi (舒淇) provided in Part 1. Written and produced — again — by Luc Besson.



Elegy

Ben Kingsley is a professor of literary criticism in New York who never got over the bug for seducing students — careful seductions, so as not to jeopardize his tenure — and his next target is Penelope Cruz. The wily bugger isn't quite prepared for his own primal jealousy, and that's before Cruz's Cuban character ratchets up the emotional heat. A good supporting cast (Dennis Hopper, Patricia Clarkson, Peter Saarsgard) helps to sell a story that will put off a lot of potential audiences from the get-go. *The Village Voice* called this adaptation of Philip Roth's book *The Dying Animal* "dreary," but other critics have been kinder. Either way, it's got Kingsley, who has seduced movie lovers for decades, and Cruz, whose best movies have been the ones that fewer people see.



The Last Princess

This is a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*, the rich clan warfare classic from 1958 that provided Western filmmakers with bountiful inspiration — not least George Lucas. This version of hidden gold and epic battles prefers celebrity and computer-generated special effects to characterization, which marks it as a would-be classic for the Nintendo era. Those who think depictions of samurai are falling apart on the big screen these days should check out Kurosawa's oldies, or even the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series for immediate, if even more bloodthirsty, relief. Directed by Shinji Higuchi, whose last effort was *The Sinking of Japan*, which did reasonable business here two years ago.



The King of Ping Pong

An award-winning Swedish drama, the king of the title is a very large youngster with an odd family whose dirty laundry is more hindrance than help to his personal development. But he does have a supportive — if combative — brother, and his devotion to table tennis is a bonus. Family secrets emerge over time, and things take a turn from the slightly whimsical to the dramatic. Likened to *My Life as a Dog*, the classic Swedish thematic forerunner to this effort, there might also be a touch of the younger Jane Campion (*Sweetie*, for instance) in the way director Jens Jonsson goes about his business.



Film Notes

THE BLACK BALLOON

DIRECTED BY: ELISSA DOWN

STARRING: RHYNS WAKEFIELD (THOMAS), LUKE FORD (CHARLIE), GEMMA WARD (JACKIE), ERIK THOMSON (SIMON), TONI COLLETTE (MAGGIE)

RUNNING TIME: 97 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Sweet are the uses of adversity

With an autistic child, the Mollisons face their trials and tribulations by tapping seemingly infinite reserves of love and patience

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Would you be able to cope? That is the unspoken challenge laid down by *The Black Balloon*, a harrowing, unsentimental portrait of a middle-class Australian family whose oldest son has severe autism compounded by attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Would you find in yourself the seemingly infinite reserves of love and patience possessed by the Mollisons, the movie's itinerant, highly stressed army family who have just moved to the suburbs of Sydney? Maybe not.

The Black Balloon, directed by Elissa Down, was inspired by her experiences growing up in a household with two autistic brothers, the younger of whom served as the model for Charlie (Luke Ford), a mute who communicates in sign language and heaving, wheezing grunts. When calm, Charlie is adorably playful and cuddlesome, but when agitated, which is often, he makes noises that assume a feral intensity.

At his most intimidating, during uncontrollable tantrums, he becomes a desperate wild animal, flailing and spitting and biting. Ford, who was seen earlier this year as the hero's rambunctious son in *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*, makes Charlie a character whose complexity transcends his disability; you can almost decipher the words he is unable to speak.



Down's sympathetic alter ego is Charlie's slightly younger brother, Thomas (Rhys Wakefield), a shy 15-year-old whose love for Charlie is increasingly compromised by his embarrassment. As the new kid at his school, Thomas is something of a fish out of water himself; barely able to swim, he struggles to stay afloat during lifesaving classes. He is so ashamed of Charlie, who attends a school for the disabled, that when Jackie (Gemma Ward), a sweet, attractive girl his own age, comes calling, he futilely tries to keep him out of sight.

The Black Balloon offers a wrenching portrait of the Mollison household. The boys' exhausted mother, Maggie (Toni Collette), only days away from giving birth to a third child, refuses the bed rest ordered by her doctors. When she goes to the hospital to give birth, her husband, Simon (Erik Thomson), a gruff, good-hearted army officer, mistakenly imagines that the house can run smoothly while she is away. No sooner has she left than Charlie begins wreaking havoc.

The scenes of Charlie running amok are agonizing. One afternoon he flees in his underwear

A welcome strain of tenderness in an otherwise wrenching story of relationships pushed to their limits.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEW ACTION ENTERTAINMENT CO.

and, with Thomas in frantic pursuit, dashes through the neighborhood and into a strange house to use the bathroom. In a supermarket checkout line he flops onto the floor and begins bellowing when Simon asks him to return some items to the shelves; eventually he has to be dragged out of the store screaming. At one point an angry neighbor summons

child services to the Mollisons' home. In the most repellent scene, Charlie is discovered in his room smearing his feces on the carpet and over his body. Thomas is expected to clean up the mess. His growing sense of being trapped by his brother's disability is evoked in moments when he anxiously listens to Charlie's noises and to the squall of the newborn through the door of his room.

The blooming puppy love between Thomas and Jackie lends *The Black Balloon* a welcome strain of tenderness. Wakefield and Ward project the innocence of shy, sensitive young people for whom a tentative shared kiss is a very big deal.

But Collette's Maggie is the film's prime mover. This wonderful Australian actress, who hasn't a shred of vanity, virtually disappears into the complicated characters she plays, and Maggie is one of the strongest. With every forceful gesture and glaring look, Collette portrays Maggie as an indefatigable woman of heart and sinew who, through sheer determination, holds off chaos.

Lifestyles of the rich and clueless

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

At first blush, *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* has a rather dated feel to it, and comes over almost as a refuge from the late 1930s. This could be mildly disconcerting, but quality performances by a strong cast of second-tier actors bring the whole thing together in a delightfully old-fashioned comedy.

The Miss Pettigrew of the title is played by Frances McDormand, who has performed in the supporting role in a number of excellent films and is probably best-known for her Oscar-winning performance as Police Chief Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* (1996). She has made something of a specialty of rough diamond characters, a loving heart that shines out from a somewhat world-weary exterior.

In *Miss Pettigrew* she plays a stern governess, a vicar's daughter who has some trouble dealing with the flighty upper-crust types she is called upon to serve in order to make ends meet. That is until she meets Delysia, an aspiring star sleeping her way to the top.

Delysia leads Miss Pettigrew into her high-society world, with its many dirty little secrets, blackmail and back-stabbing, embodied in the character of

Frances McDormand, left, and Amy Adams, right, form an unlikely duo in this heart-warmingly old-fashioned romp.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW ACTION ENTERTAINMENT

Film Notes

MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY

DIRECTED BY: BHARAT NALLURI

STARRING: FRANCES MCDORMAND (GUINEVERE PETTIGREW), AMY ADAMS (DELYSIA), SHIRLEY HENDERSON (EDYTHE), CIARAN HINDS (JOE), CHRISTINA COLE (CHARLOTTE WARREN), STEPHANIE COLE (MISS HOLT), BEATIE EDNEY (MRS BRUMMEGAN)

RUNNING TIME: 92 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Edythe, played by the ever delightful Shirley Henderson. There are a number of *Pretty Woman* moments as Miss Pettigrew is introduced to the delights of a decadent world, a million miles from the soup kitchens into which she might fall back at any moment. Miss Pettigrew has a

foundation of common sense and a knowledge of the world's harshness that is not shared by the bright young things around her, and more by accident than design finds herself in the role of fixer for various romantic contretemps. The film is so light and airy that it is constantly in danger of drifting off. It is anchored by Ciaran Hinds, who plays Joe, a lingerie designer and a counterpoint of studied elegance and emotional seriousness in a growing appreciation of Miss Pettigrew's virtues.

Set on the eve of World War II, director Bharat Nalluri provides a base note of sorrow that rumbles just beneath the frothy surface. It may all end happily ever after when Delysia finally finds the courage — instilled by Miss Pettigrew — to walk into the night with the right man, but the Lancaster bombers are already flying overhead, and both Joe and Miss Pettigrew know that the future is anything but certain.



Clockwise from top left: Hip Hop Storm, Music and Life, The White Diamond, Grizzly Man and Children of God.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CNEX

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: CNEX Documentary Film Festival (驚人說夢 — CNEX主題紀錄片影展)

WHEN: From tomorrow through Dec. 28

WHERE: Screening rooms at EsLite Bookstore Dunman Branch (敦南誠品), B2, 245, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段245號B2) and EsLite Xinyi Store (誠品信義店), 6F, 11 Songgao Rd, Taipei City (台北市松高路11號6樓)

TICKETS: NT\$100 for film screenings and NT\$300 for lectures, available through NTCH ticket outlets or through www.artsticket.com.tw

ON THE NET: www.cnex.org.tw

Dream on

The second CNEX film festival examines the hopes and dreams of Chinese-speaking societies

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Created with a view to recording the evolution of Chinese-speaking cultures, the non-profit organization Chinese Next (CNEX) initiated its documentary project two years ago by disbursing money to aspiring filmmakers.

IDEAL-ORIENTED FESTIVAL

Last year's theme was the role of money in society. This year, 10 new films were produced under the rubric of dreams, hopes and ideals and will be screened at the CNEX Documentary Film Festival.

Highlights of this year's festival include: *Shanghai Farmers* (阿拉民工), which examines how Chinese peasants

leaving home to work odd jobs in Shanghai view the concept of happiness; *Ancient Species* (紅穀子), in which a group of Yunnan Province farmers go organic and rediscover an ancient strain of rice and cultivate it using revived ancient techniques; and *Music and Life* (音樂人生), a film from Hong Kong that paints an emotionally-charged portrait of the talented but existentially-challenged young piano prodigy Wong Ka-jeng (黃家正), now 17.

The festival's only Taiwanese production, *Hip-Hop Storm* (街舞狂潮), follows the fast-paced lives of hip-hop artists from two generations. The first group features 34-year-old A-lun on tour, performing in contests in

his bid to put Taiwanese hip-hop on the map. The second features a group of teenage street dancers who perform simply for the fun of it.

FOCUS ON SOCIAL INJUSTICE

The large number of Chinese jury members on the selection committee limited the lineup's scope to social issues, festival director Wu Fan (吳凡) said. The selected projects mostly focus on social injustices rather than experiment with other subjects and cinematic styles.

Apart from the CNEX-funded works, the festival showcases approximately 40 films that explore the meanings of dreams and hopes in different corners of

the world. In *Children of God*, *War Dance* and *Paujee*, children from different cultures wish for different things, from reliving lost childhoods, to attending school, to escaping the grip of poverty.

Other festival highlights include four documentaries by German director Werner Herzog. Whether it is the airship engineer in *White Diamond*, the Swiss ski jumper in *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* or the grizzly bear activist in *Grizzly Man*, Herzog turns his lens, from a critical distance, to whimsical characters and their daring struggles for self-realization.