



Once upon a time, there was a resentful handyman who agreed to babysit

When Adam Sandler's far-fetched bedtime stories come to life, he bests the villains and bags the girls

BY JEANNETTE CATSOULIS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



Adam Sandler is at that difficult age. Now 42, he's too old to continue with the bungling, man-child shtick of yore, yet too young to transition to old-fogey infantilism. In *Bedtime Stories* the pain of this artistic limbo is written all over his character, a resentful hotel handyman named Skeeter. Astonishingly, his name is not the source of his umbrage.

Skeeter's pique (though he may not know it) is reserved for his dead father, an inept businessman whose cozy motel once occupied the lot where Skeeter's current employer has erected an upscale resort. Gone, along with the homespun vibe, is Skeeter's dream of one day running the property; so when his divorced sister, Wendy (a frighteningly taut Courteney Cox), asks him to baby-sit for his young niece and nephew (Laura Ann Kesling and Jonathan Morgan Heit) for a few days, Skeeter is in no mood to play scallywag uncle.

"I don't believe in happy endings," he tells his incredulous charges when story time comes around. Luckily for the tykes, their director, Adam Shankman, loves them, the happier the better. (Even as a guest judge on *So You Think You Can Dance* Shankman, a popular choreographer, squirmed mightily to avoid delivering a bad critique.)

Rolling up his sleeves and piling on the digital effects, he labors to whip life into a screenplay (by Matt Lopez and Tim Herlihy) so tired even Bugsy, the children's pop-eyed guinea pig, is moved to tuck himself into bed.

But Shankman is not one to give up without a fight. And as the children concoct their own stories, Skeeter and the rest of the cast are dragged through a variety of threadbare fantasies — an Old West showdown, a medieval joust, a chariot race in ancient Greece — in which Skeeter inevitably bests the

Film Notes
BEDTIME STORIES
DIRECTED BY: ADAM SHANKMAN
STARRING: ADAM SANDLER (SKEETER BRONSON), KERI RUSSELL (JILL), GUY PEARCE (KENDALL), RUSSELL BRAND (MICKEY), RICHARD GRIFFITHS (BARRY NOTTINGHAM), JONATHAN PRYCE (MARTY BRONSON), COURTNEY COX (WENDY), LUCY LAWLESS (ASPEN), LAURA ANN KESLING (BOBBI), JONATHAN MORGAN HEIT (PATRICK), TERESA PALMER (VIOLET NOTTINGHAM), AISHA TYLER (DONNA HYNDE)
RUNNING TIME: 98 MINUTES
TAIWAN RELEASE: CURRENTLY SHOWING

villain and bags the girl. The adorable Keri Russell, as the unfortunate target of Skeeter's passive-aggressive affections, is the movie's soft center and sole pleasure: a locus of calm in a sea of turmoil.

Faring less well are performers whose tenure in children's entertainment will, I

hope, be brief, including Lucy Lawless as a brittle desk clerk and Russell Brand as Skeeter's fuzzily written best friend. And if there were an Oscar for miscasting, Guy Pearce's atrocious turn as the hotel's pompous manager would be a lock. Mugging beneath a horrendous coif, he makes Basil

Fawlty look like a paragon of restraint.

Almost everyone leaves blood on the floor, but *Bedtime Stories* refuses to be juiced; soured by its enervated star and uninspired writing, the movie offers only tiny moments of joy, like a hailstorm of gumballs that's unexpectedly magical.

Clearly, pushing Skeeter's broom doesn't agree with Sandler, who seems impatient with immaturity and anxious to grow up. He was much happier selling novelty toilet plungers in *Punch-Drunk Love*, but the director of that movie, Paul Thomas Anderson, recognized his star's natural inner rage and how to tap into it, encouraging a revelatory performance unlike anything on his resume.

If Sandler hopes to shift smoothly into more mature roles (as indicated by last year's *Reign Over Me*), he needs directors who understand his uncommon gifts. The toilet plungers are optional.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Childhoods

From France, this is a series of short films that creates scenes from the childhoods of famed filmmakers. Part of the gimmick is to leave the identification of the director to the end of the piece, which means that audiences can have fun trying to tease out clues on who the child really is. Interestingly, two of the six subjects themselves made classic films about children — unfortunately, however, neither of them is Francois Truffaut, though perhaps everyone balked at reshooting scenes from *The 400 Blows*. Screening exclusively at the Changchun theater in Taipei.



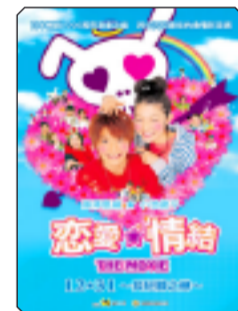
The Magic Hour

Koki Mitani is a sometime film director from the Japanese theater who has made a small number of highly successful comedies for the big screen and TV. *The Magic Hour* is his latest, a screwball comedy homage that sees a nightclub boss get caught having an affair with a crime lord's dame. To save his life, he lies about knowing the whereabouts of a mysterious man the gang is looking for, and then has an actor impersonate him. It's all lunacy and laughs from there. Happily, fans of Mitani and this kind of film will also have the chance to see his previous movie *Suite Dreams*, made in 2006, which opens next week in limited release.



Lovely Complex

This Japanese manga adaptation explores the outer reaches of cute as tallish freak girl meets shortish geek boy, spending the next 100 minutes or so pretending not to adore each other. Bright colors, music, basketball, larger than life performances, exaggerated facial expressions — just about enough to impress kids on their first date movie. This was made three years ago, which suggests local distributors are beginning to trawl through back catalogs of manga movies for stuff to throw at the market. Also known as *Love.com*.



The Librarian: Return to King Solomon's Mines

From tomorrow, the Baxue theater in Ximending hosts another bunch of tie-in screenings of HiNet hiChannel product, this time an *Indiana Jones*-style TV movie sequel from 2006. Noah Wyle plays Flynn Carsen, curator of historical treasures and compulsive adventurer, who must rush to the title location to stop bad guys from gaining a magical book that can grant them power over time and space. Also stars Bob Newhart and Olympia Dukakis. A third in the series, the delicately titled *The Librarian: The Curse of the Judas Chalice*, was made this year. Parts 2 and 3 were directed by Jonathan Frakes, better known as Commander Riker in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.



In 1928, Los Angeles telephone company supervisor Christine Collins returned home from work and discovered that her nine-year-old son was missing. Five months later, police announced they had found the boy in Illinois and returned him to Collins

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Toward the end of Clint Eastwood's *Changeling*, in what is perhaps the only lighthearted scene in this rigorously somber film, Christine Collins, the heroine, is invited by some of her phone company co-workers, and then by her boss, to go out on the town and listen to the Academy Awards radio broadcast. The year is 1935, and *It Happened One Night* is Christine's pick for best picture, but it's hard to avoid interpreting this moment as a none-too-subtle wink directed at present-day moviegoers and Academy voters. Christine begs off — she just has too much work — and it goes without saying that on Feb. 22, Angelina Jolie, who plays her, will have to make similar excuses. She won't be watching the Oscars with the likes of us; we'll be watching her.

That seems to be the plan behind *Changeling*, at any rate, an ambition telegraphed a shade too blatantly in the many close-ups of Jolie's extraordinary face, which is by turns tear-streaked, stoical, crestfallen and howling. To watch her trace Christine's harrowing emotional passage — a series of flights from anxiety to terror, from grief to rage, pausing occasionally at calm defiance or tremulous hope — is to witness an undeniable tour de force of screen acting. It insists on being regarded as a great performance and may, indeed, be mistaken for one.

In the past five years Eastwood has enabled more first-rate, laurel-worthy acting than just about any other American filmmaker. There was Ken Watanabe in *Letters From Iwo Jima*; Ryan Phillippe in *Flags of Our Fathers*; Hilary Swank and Morgan Freeman (and Eastwood himself) in *Million Dollar Baby*; everybody in *Mystic River*. All of

these actors, taking advantage of the director's famously efficient, low-stress approach, were able to stretch out in the zone between realism and melodrama, to explore their characters' raw nerves, tender spots and psychic calluses.

Jolie, in contrast, hurtles through *Changeling* as if it were the latest installment in the Lara Croft action franchise, sustaining a pitch of intensity that turns Christine at once into a vivid icon of suffering and something of a blur. The character, as imagined in J. Michael Straczynski's script, is as flat as a nickel. Each side is stamped with the likeness of a familiar movie archetype — victim of circumstance on one, crusader against injustice on the other — and Jolie composes her features and adjusts her voice accordingly when it comes time to flip.

But something essential is missing, not only from her performance but also from the film as a whole. Announcing itself at the outset as "a true story" without the usual "based on" or "inspired by" hedge, *Changeling* is by turns fascinating and frustrating, emphatic and opaque. The truth about the case of Christine Collins is so shocking and dramatic that embellishment must have seemed pointless, but in sticking so close to the historical record, Straczynski and Eastwood have produced a distended, awkward narrative whose strongest themes are lost in the murky pomp of period detail.

In March 1928, Christine, a single mother living in Los Angeles, returns home from her shift supervising a busy switchboard to find that her young son, Walter (Gattlin Griffith), is missing. The initial response of the Los Angeles Police Department is casual and condescending, which turns out

to be a chilly foretaste of worse treatment to follow. After a few months, with great fanfare and press coverage, the city's hatchet-faced police chief (Colm Feore) stages a reunion between Christine and a boy who is evidently not Walter. When Christine points this out, she is treated first as a hysterical, traumatized woman and then as a lunatic and a threat to public order. She is ignored, smeared in the papers and then locked away in a mental hospital.

When it works best, *Changeling* is a feverish and bluntly effective parable of wronged innocence and unaccountable power. One after another, figures of supposedly benevolent authority — a police captain (Jeffrey Donovan), a pediatrician (Peter Gerety), a psychiatrist (Denis O'Hare) — turn out to be cruel and self-serving, and there are scenes that recall the

relentless, claustrophobic sadism of *Rosemary's Baby*. Unlike Mia Farrow's histrionically helpless Rosemary, however, Christine has instincts that run more toward fight than flight, and she is aided in her darkest hour by a crusading Presbyterian minister (John Malkovich) and a square-jawed, patrician lawyer (Geoff Pierson).

When the focus is on Christine's bureaucratic nightmare, Eastwood, who composed the film's uncharacteristically intrusive score, orchestrates a steady crescendo of dread and indignation, with gothic elements lurking in the shadows of Tom Stern's cinematography. Some of the performances — Donovan's snappish arrogance, O'Hare's cat-and-mouse sadism — seem overstated to the point of caricature, but to the extent that *Changeling* is a horror movie, such exaggeration makes sense.

But then, near the climax of Christine's ordeal, another movie begins to take shape. The only decent man in the Los Angeles Police Department, a detective named Lester Ybarra (the excellent, blessedly understated Michael Kelly) begins to unravel the mystery of Walter's disappearance. And as he does, *Changeling* itself comes unraveled. I don't want to give too much away, but the truth is that the film spoils itself.

At around the 90-minute mark, all of the considerable tension and suspense drain away, and if the film ended at that point, you might walk away shaken and perhaps stunned. But when you look at your watch, you discover that almost an hour remains, during which the film lurches from one stagy set piece and from one genre to another, losing its focus and coherence in the process.

Film Notes

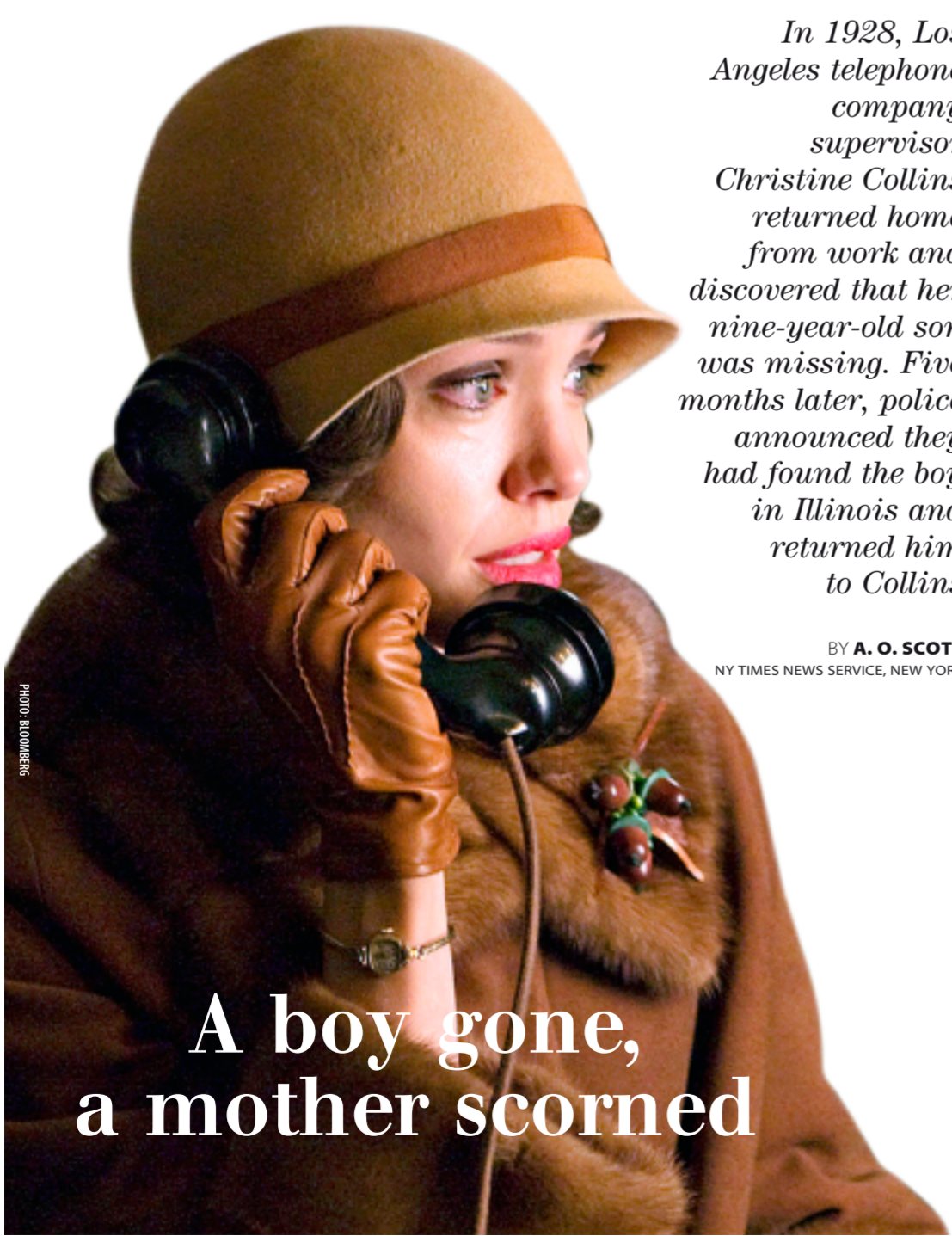
CHANGELING

DIRECTED BY: CLINT EASTWOOD

STARRING: ANGELINA JOLIE (CHRISTINE COLLINS), JOHN MALKOVICH (THE REVEREND GUSTAV BRIEGLER), JEFFREY DONOVAN (CAPTAIN JONES), MICHAEL KELLY (DETECTIVE LESTER YBARRA), COLM FEORE (CHIEF JAMES DAVIS), JASON BUTLER HARNER (GORDON NORTHCOTT), AMY RYAN (CAROL DEXTER), DENIS O'HARE (DR. JONATHAN STEELE), FRANK WOOD (BEN HARRIS), PETER GERETY (DR. EARL TARR), GATTLIN GRIFFITH (WALTER COLLINS)

RUNNING TIME: 140 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: CURRENTLY SHOWING



A boy gone, a mother scorned

PHOTO: KIMURA