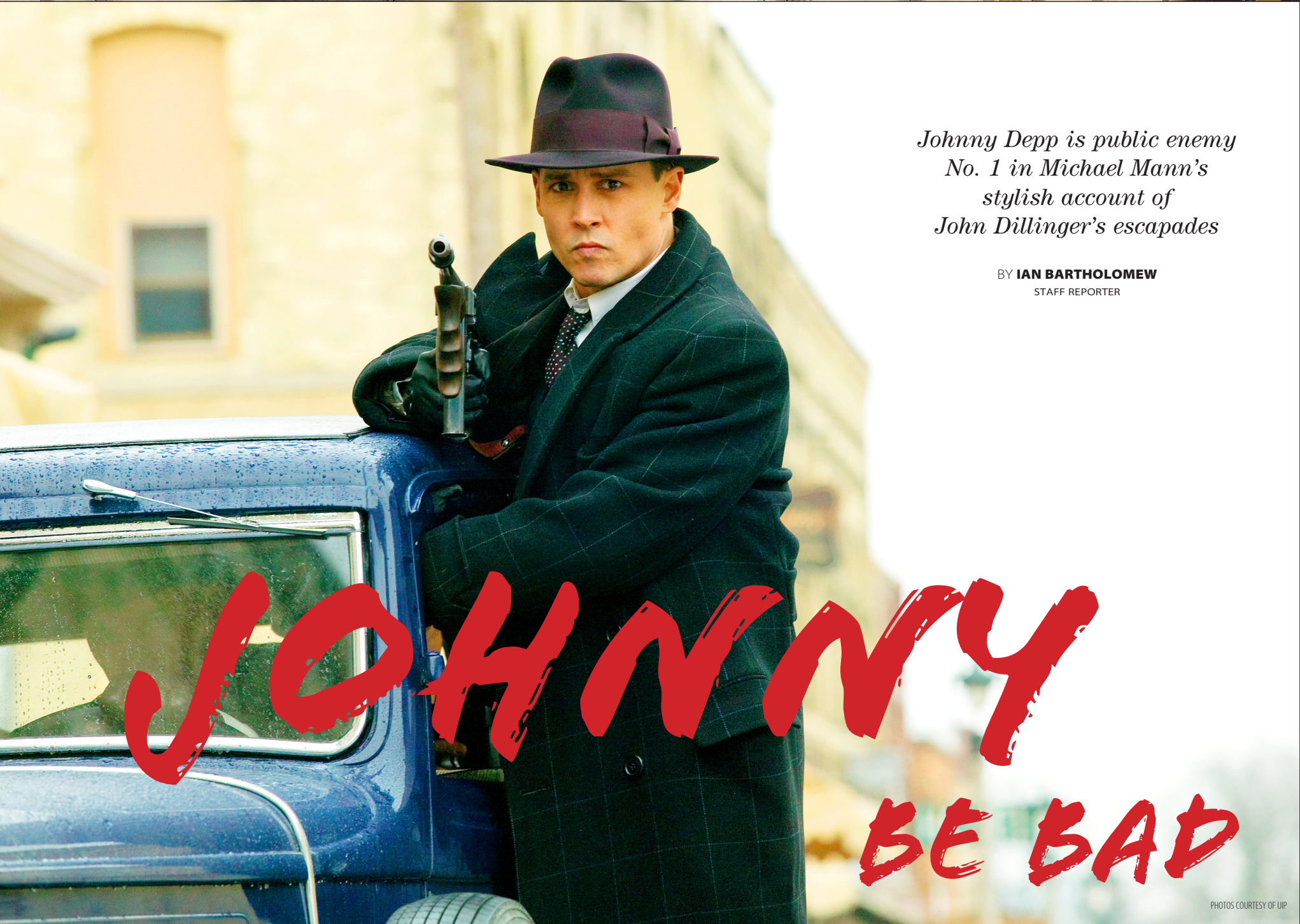


F I L M R E V I E W



Johnny Depp is public enemy No. 1 in Michael Mann's stylish account of John Dillinger's escapades

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Film Notes

PUBLIC ENEMIES

DIRECTED BY: MICHAEL MANN

STARRING: JOHNNY DEPP (JOHN DILLINGER), CHRISTIAN BALE (MELVIN PURVIS), BILLY CRUDUP (J. EDGAR HOOVER), MARION COTILLARD (BILLIE FRECHETTE), STEPHEN LANG (CHARLES WINSTEAD), JAMES RUSSO (WALTER DIETRICH), JASON CLARKE (JOHN 'RED' HAMILTON)

RUNNING TIME: 104 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



Never has bank robbery looked so beautiful. In Michael Mann's *Public Enemies*, each heist is an intricately choreographed dance of aggression, fear and violence that is always just about to disintegrate into chaos. These masterful action sequences would have been even better if we knew, or cared, a little more about the people who are enacting them. Unfortunately, Mann does not seem particularly interested in people, and the whole exercise of *Public Enemies* is a magnificent triumph of style over content.

The problem all begins with Johnny Depp's John Dillinger, who looks down the road of bank heists toward either death or some kind of transcendence. He exercises the same kind of charisma on the media circus of the movie as he does on the cinema audience, but the nuts and bolts of his authority over his crew are never really addressed. Various hard cases from around the country all seem more than ready to take their lead from this soulful romantic with a Tommy gun.

At least Dillinger has style on his side, and after the addition of Marion Cotillard's Billie Frechette as his love interest, he is irresistible. As an encouragement to live for the moment and damn all the rest, their romance is up there with Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), though rather less convincing. Cotillard does more real acting in her few short sequences than

is done in most of the rest of the film, managing to convey the vulnerability and pride of Dillinger's girl, a waif blown about on the terrible whirlwinds of violence that rage around her.

While the members of Dillinger's gang are a shadowy cast of figures who generally only acquire a personality moments before they die, the bunch of FBI agents under the lead of Christian Bale's Special Agent Melvin Purvis are even more insubstantial.

The agents are portrayed both as violent and inept, and in many ways not very different than Dillinger's various gang members. They operate against the background of J. Edgar Hoover's attempts to build up the bureau into a modern technocratic agency. The politics that drive Purvis are dealt with in a cursory manner, a mere nod to the book on which the film is loosely based — Bryan Burrough's *Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933-34* — and hint at a fascinating story behind Dillinger's romancing and shoot-'em-up activities that was taking place in the corridors of power. Other tantalizing hints are given to the changing nature of organized crime at this time, with the powerful syndicates running numbers and other rackets distancing themselves from violent, attention-seeking robbers like Dillinger.

Purvis is deeply hampered by the lack of experienced muscle in his force, and this provides an opportunity for the

introduction of some old-school lawmen, most notably embodied by the massive form and cold wise eyes of Stephen Lang, who plays Charles Winstead, a traditional lawman of the Texas Ranger stamp.

There are many gorgeous and hugely expressive images and sequences in *Public Enemies*. It has been widely commented that the digital format has a coldness that deprives *Public Enemies* of the lush colors often associated with such period pieces. Rather than weakening the film, this does much to undercut the exoticism of the 1930s setting, giving it a harder contemporary edge.

Music adds to the many appealing qualities of *Public Enemies*, which features Diana Krall as a club singer and has her rendition of *Bye, Bye Blackbird* as a central motif running through the film. Tracks by Billie Holiday, Otis Taylor and Blind Willie Johnson feed into the vein of sorrow and hardship that was Depression-era America, and provide the period atmosphere even more effectively than the visuals.

Given that *Public Enemies* is supposed to tell the story of Dillinger, it would be nice to have left the theater with a little more knowledge about the progress of his life or the world in which he lived. Mann has given us a gorgeous collage, and though he has included many of the most significant events of Dillinger's story, he seems to be telling anyone who asks to look up the facts elsewhere.

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Digital Restoration festival

The Taipei County Government is hosting this Chinese Taipei Film Archive program in its main building. The curator has assembled some interesting old (and not so old) films from around the world that have received a digital boost, even if the format seems to be HDCAM for all screenings. Entry is free, but some of these flicks would be worth paying to see. Taiwan is represented by *Our Neighbors* (街頭巷尾, 1963) by director Lee Hsing (李行), whose festival at the Spot theater concluded last week. Then there are rarely screened works by Antonioni (*Le Amiche*, 1955), Visconti (*Senso*, 1954) and Carl Theodor Dreyer (*Die Gezeichneten*, 1922). There are other early Scandinavian films from Norway and Denmark, an American documentary from 1958 (*Grand Canyon*) and an episode of the English sitcom *Dad's Army*, of all things. Finally, there's the original *The Wizard of Oz*, which demands repeat viewings regardless of format. The program starts this Tuesday and finishes the following Saturday, with individual films screening three times at most. More details at www.ctfa.org.tw/2009DRFS.



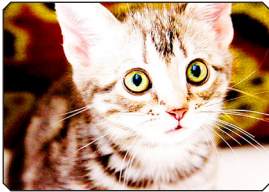
The Great Buck Howard

John Malkovich is back with another strange but true-to-life role as Buck Howard, a magician and one-time chat show regular with a never-fail trick that keeps the audiences coming back even as he plays to lesser and lesser rooms. Colin Hanks (producer Tom Hanks' lad) is his gopher who guides the viewer through this odd man's traveling show. Filled with cameos by media personalities playing themselves, this is worth a look, especially for those who long for the return of vaudeville.



Gu Gu the Cat

There's been quite a few dog and cat-themed films out of Japan over the past few years. The most recent cat flick was *Nekonade*, in which a soulless older man warms to a stray kitten and learns to live a better life. *Gu Gu the Cat* has a similar theme, though the manga-drawing heroine is already a cat lover by the time she adopts the titular feline, but will it help her out of a deep depression? Curiously features one-time Megadeth guitarist Marty Friedman in the supporting role of an English teacher-cum-Greek chorus.



Rahtree Reborn

This is the second sequel to 2003's *Buppha Rahtree*, a bloody comic-horror effort from Thailand, which turned *The Exorcist* into a comedy but kept the nasty stuff intact (*Scary Movie 2* tried to do the same in its opening scene, and would have been a better film had it stuck with that idea). In this installment, the put-upon female ghost of the first two films is re-embodied at the expense of an abused schoolgirl — who conveniently has an awful lot of potential targets to slice up. Also known as *Buppha Rahtree 3.1*, and installment "3.2" is in the pipeline.



Jodhaa Akbar

This sprawling Indian historical saga secured a mainstream release in the US, which suggests it's a mixture of Bollywood and Hollywood. Hrithik Roshan plays India's first locally born Muslim emperor who marries a politically connected Hindu woman (Aishwarya Rai Bachchan) for practical reasons but ends up working for her love and respect anyway — even as court intrigue grows and war beckons. Even by Indian standards, this one's an epic: It's more than three-and-a-half hours long, but it's quite intimate and well worth the trip, according to seasoned Western reviewers.



Der Bibelcode

This German TV movie about *Da Vinci Code*-style intrigue at the Vatican was supposed to start on July 4 but was pulled at the last minute. Those who can't get enough of Dan Brown imitations might find something to enjoy, though as with last time, a warning is in order: This is likely a seriously pruned version of the three-hour original. Starts tomorrow.



Killer Bees

Like *Der Bibelcode*, this made-for-German-TV disaster entry was pulled without notice three weeks ago. For those crestfallen that *The Swarm* (1978) did not spawn a hive of sequels and remakes, this movie about intrepid scientists, global threat and pissed-off insects is for you. Starts tomorrow.



Boys will be boys

An attractive young teacher hits on a novel way to motivate a group of nerdy junior high students in 'Oppai Volleyball'

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwan is infatuated with a bevy of "big-breasted bodacious baby-faced babes" (童顏巨乳), so who could resist the chance to review a movie titled *Oppai Volleyball*, the Chinese title of which translates as "Big-Breasted Volleyball — The Determination to Win of a Hot-Blooded School Team" (巨乳排球:熱血校隊的決勝心願), from the land that inspired *otaku* mania? *Oppai* is clearly another Japanese word, like *otaku*, destined for inclusion in the Taiwanese, or even the English-language, lexicon, its wide-open vowel certain to inspire those who feel the need to express their appreciation of a fine rack. The fact that *Oppai Volleyball* (Oppai Bare) stars swimsuit model Haruka Ayase, who is widely acknowledged to have a fine pair (official bust/waist/hip measurement is 88/62/92, for those who need to know) gives this flick additional credentials. It needs to be stated right at the beginning that for those aiming to get an eyeful, disappointment awaits. As I left the theater, one member of the audience commented to his companion: "We had to sit



Educational attainment takes on a whole new meaning when Haruka Ayase, far right, is put in charge of her school's no-hope volleyball club.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCPLAY

though all that, and we never even got to see her tits."

For truth be told, *Oppai Volleyball* is a rather innocent little piece of cinema, a junior high school version of National Lampoon with an inspirational message at the end.

Ayase is certainly very easy on the eyes, and manages a mix of confusion and determination, as well as wearing, in the opening scene, a short tartan skirt and plaid knee-high socks, which is going to have the *otaku* crowd positively drooling.

That is, of course, the idea.

Ayase plays a teacher, Mikako Terashima, who on arrival at a new school gets given the school's no-hope boys volleyball club. The five members are really only interested in one thing: fantasizing about *oppai*. Since these nerds are unlikely to get anywhere with the girls at the school, they resort to various antics to satisfy their curiosity about the female body. To give them some inspiration to become a proper sports team, Terashima agrees to let them check out her mammalian protuberances if they manage to win a game in the interschool competition. Such is the premise of the movie, which then progresses through every cliché of the underdog school movie genre, with the unlikely team members working like maniacs to hone their athletic skills for the ultimate prize: seeing their teacher's *oppai*.

The story gets out, Terashima is fired, but the boys manage to make it to the main competition and give every ounce of themselves in a game against insuperable odds.

The potentially serious moral implications of the contract between the teacher and her students is at no point

regarded as being of the slightest interest, which is in many ways a blessing, leaving *Oppai Volleyball* as an innocuous piece of inconsequential fluff with no aspirations to be anything else.

The word *oppai* occurs more times in the movie than one would have thought possible, and the breast gag is the only joke in the film. Well, perhaps not the only one; the director may be having his own private joke in having Ayase wear more clothes in *Oppai Volleyball* than she does in any number of her glamour photos.

Film Notes

OPPAI VOLLEYBALL

DIRECTED BY: EIICHIRO HASUMI

STARRING: HARUKA AYASE (MIKAKO TERASHIMA), MUNETAKE AOKI (KAZUKI JO), TORU NAKAMURA (KENJI HORIUCHI)

RUNNING TIME: 102 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN JAPANESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY