

FILM REVIEW



Nicolas Cage plays the title character and Eva Mendes plays his girlfriend in *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, directed by Werner Herzog. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

The big sleazy

Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans — what an ungainly title for a movie. What does it mean? What kind of sense does it make? You might ask the same questions of the film itself, directed by Werner Herzog and related, by some equally puzzling movie-business genealogy, to another *Bad Lieutenant*, Abel Ferrara's 1992 tour of New York law-enforcement hell. Neither remake nor sequel, this *Bad Lieutenant* is its own special fever-swamp of a movie, an anarchist film noir that seems, at times, almost as unhinged as its protagonist.

Nicolas Cage returns to form in Werner Herzog's 'Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans'

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

Fueled by Nicolas Cage's performance — which requires adjectives as yet uncoined, typed with both the caps-lock key and the italics button engaged — Herzog's film is a pulpy, glorious mess. Its maniacal unpredictability is such a blast that it reminds you just how tidy and dull most crime thrillers are these days.

The genre, once a repository of weirdness, wild emotion and sly cinematic invention, has recently devolved into a state of glum, routine sadism. The stories lurch toward phony and mechanical surprise endings, and the heroes tend to be glowering ciphers of righteous vengeance, exacting payback and muttering second-hand tough-guy catchphrases.

Not Terence McDonagh, Cage's New Orleans cop, who clings to an insane sense of professionalism even as his demons drive him around every bend in the Mississippi River. (Am I talking about the actor or the character? It may be a tribute to Cage's genius that I'm not quite certain.) Over the years Cage has done his action-hero duty, from *Con Air* to the *National Treasure* movies, and he has often been more interesting than a lot of his peers, holding on to some of the idiosyncrasy that makes him worth watching even at his least inspired. Here, though, he is a jittery whirlwind of inventiveness, throwing his body and voice in every direction and keeping McDonagh, the movie and the audience in a delirious state of imbalance.

Sometimes his loose-limbed shuffle and sibilant drawl suggest Jimmy Stewart as a crackhead. (Is there any other movie actor who can summon such a phrase to mind?) At other moments he breaks out in hip-hop non sequiturs, crowing: "To the break of dawn! To the break of dawn!"

He hallucinates iguanas, takes care of a dog and whispers sweet nothings to his call-girl girlfriend (Eva Mendes). He gambles. He steals. He shakes down college boys and gropes their dates. (Now I'm talking about the character, not the actor.)

And — if I may indulge a hip-hop non sequitur of my own — it's all good. What may seem like random, dissociated bursts of energy are in fact the brilliant syncopations of a player with a sure, if unorthodox, sense of rhythm.

I'm still referring to Cage, but also to Herzog, who sets William Finkelstein's properly pulpy screenplay to his own strange music. (That's a metaphor. The actual musical score, by Mark Isham, is serviceably atmospheric.)

McDonagh's ordeal begins during Hurricane Katrina, when he injures his back committing a reckless act of decency in the line of duty, freeing a prisoner from lockdown as the waters rise. For his pains McDonagh acquires a promotion and a drug habit, which combines with his gambling addiction and his fondness for the company of Frankie (Mendes) to make him a ripe target for an internal-affairs investigation.

That happens, sort of, as does a murder investigation and McDonagh's entanglement with a drug dealer evocatively named Big Fate (the rapper Xzibit). On the run and at loose ends McDonagh drops in on his dad and stepmom, who seem to be wandering around the set of a Tennessee Williams play without a script.

Who needs one? *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* — why "Port of Call"? what does that mean? — is no masterpiece, but it is undoubtedly the work of a master. For nearly 40 years Herzog has pursued madness and unreason in various manifestations — he found them, most reliably, in the person of Klaus Kinski — and sometimes succumbed to their allure. Lately he has mellowed somewhat, examining driven, obsessive souls through a ruminative documentary lens and analyzing their passions with wry, sympathetic detachment.

Terry McDonagh — which may be to say Cage as well — enters a realm where craziness and craft become one, but Herzog does not follow him all the way. There is discipline in *Bad Lieutenant*, and a principled respect, similar to that shown in Herzog's war movie *Rescue Dawn*, for the pleasures and requirements of genre.

The atmosphere is redolent with corruption and need, and nutty as the movie sometimes is, its brutality and confusion are never played for laughs. It has a warped sincerity, and an energy that keeps going and going. To the break of dawn!



Film Notes

BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS

DIRECTED BY:
WERNER HERZOG

STARRING:
TERENCE MCDONAGH (NICOLAS CAGE), FRANKIE DONNENFELD (EVA MENDES), (BIG FATE) XZIBIT, (STEVIE PRUITT) VAL KILMER, HEIDI (FAIRUZA BALK), VONDIE CURTIS-HALL (JAMES BRASSER), GENEVIEVE (JENNIFER COOLIDGE), NED SCHOENHOLTZ (BRAD DOURIF), BINNIE ROGERS (IRMA P. HALL), ARMAND BENOIT (SHAWN HATOSY)

RUNNING TIME:
122 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW



Penelope Cruz steals the show in *Broken Embraces*, directed by Pedro Almodovar. PHOTO COURTESY OF SERENITY ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL

In the mood for love

Pedro Almodovar pays homage to the past in his psychological melodrama about a blind screenwriter with a double identity

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The Third Man and *Citizen Cain*, the first played by Orson Wells, and the second directed by him. This is the first of many obvious and not so obvious cinematic references, which include Cruz playing an actress who is a dead ringer for Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and extended quotations from Almodovar's own *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al Borde de un Ataque de Nervios*, 1988).

There is no absolute separation between art and life in *Broken Embraces*, and while the constant

referencing of other cinematic works could easily have become ponderous, for Almodovar this refusal to distinguish between the two is not so much an artistic conceit but a philosophical given.

The struggle between Harry/Mateo and Ernesto over Lena, in which the latter enlists his son, the future Ray X, to spy on Lena, could easily be yet another portrayal of machismo at work over a passive love object. With Almodovar, whose sympathies are usually more with his female characters, the dynamic is reversed, with Cruz's Lena demanding the viewer's attention, even though her physical presence never dominates the screen.

In *Broken Embraces*, Almodovar also gives free rein to his love of color and symbols, which he weaves into the warp of what might be described as a film noir soap opera. Images jump off the screen, such as the ornate pop art crucifixes that decorate the walls of both Harry's and Judit's house, and Lena as Audrey Hepburn suddenly donning a platinum blond wig.

For all the clever games, Almodovar has always insisted on telling a story that has a definite beginning, middle and end, though these are utterly jumbled up in *Broken Embraces*. This jigsaw is put back together with an ending that, although corny, manages to ring true. For all the cinematic fun and games, and there are enough of those for two art house movies, *Broken Embraces* is remarkable as a thoughtful work by a director who is perfectly at ease with deconstructing his oeuvre, dissecting the stories he has told in the past, and putting the elements back together in new ways.

Apart from Cruz's outstanding performance, Lluís Homar's Harry/Mateo is full of splendid contradictions between the assured and casually sensual director and the fearful, nostalgic blind man. Jose Luis Gomez's Ernesto is full of suave menace and the hint of madness, and Blanca Portillo manages to suggest an extensive backstory with little more than her beleaguered gaze.

While perhaps a little too thoughtful or too playful to be utterly compelling as a movie, there is more than enough in *Broken Embraces* for audiences looking to test their knowledge of cinema history or simply wanting to see a good melodrama.

Film Notes

BROKEN EMBRACES (LOS ABRAZOS ROTOS)

DIRECTED BY:
PEDRO ALMODOVAR

STARRING:
LENA (PENELOPE CRUZ), HARRY/MATEO (LLUIS HOMAR), ERNESTO (JOSE LUIS GOMEZ), JUDIT (BLANCA PORTILLO), RAY X (RUBEN OCHANDIANO), DIEGO (TAMAR NOVAS)

RUNNING TIME:
127 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
SPANISH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

One of the many pleasures offered by Pedro Almodovar's most recent offering, *Broken Embraces* (Los Abrazos Rotos), is the opportunity to see Penelope Cruz working as a real actress rather than just Latin window dressing for a Hollywood feature. It is sometimes hard to remember how good an actress she really is, and in *Broken Embraces* Almodovar truly makes her shine.

What is particularly amazing about Almodovar's achievement with Cruz is that her role is not as the star or the leading character, but as a catalyst for revelations by others. Cruz's character, Lena, remains a mystery to the end, but a mystery that lingers long after the credits have rolled.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Mulan (花木蘭)

The legend of Hua Mulan returns to home soil after a spell with Disney's animation team and is a much more sober affair. The young lady dons men's clothes and signs up for the military in place of her sick father, rising through the ranks and encountering all manner of conflict — personal and physical. Worth a peek if you're a fan of historical battle epics, even if this one is scaled down somewhat, but anyone looking for a feminist subtext can forget it. Stars Vickie Zhao (趙薇), a solid actress but way too good-looking to convince as a cross-dressing military genius, and directed by leading Hong Kong cinematographer Jingle Ma (馬楚成).



Hachiko: A Dog's Story

After a string of Japanese cute animal movies, here's an American production with possibly wider international appeal, though it is based on a Japanese legend and movie (it premiered in Japan, but its US release next week is disappointingly low-key). Richard Gere — delightful piece of casting — is a professor who adopts a stray dog. The legend is no secret: The professor dies, but the dog returns to the local railway station every day for a decade to wait for his master to come home. The surprise is that this version enjoyed strong audience feedback. Great supporting cast (Joan Allen as Gere's wife, Jason Alexander, veteran Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa) and directed by Lasse Hallstrom (appropriately enough), director of the well-loved *My Life as a Dog* (appropriately enough) from 1985, who has happily retained Japanese elements in the story. Warning: The word is that this movie will leave audiences in tears.



The Box

A stranger comes to the door of the home of Cameron Diaz and hubby James Marsden, gives them a box with a button and informs them that pushing the button will make them instantly wealthy — but lead to the death of a stranger. From here things get complex, compromised and philosophical, as the protagonists' moral compass spins ever more unsteadily. Sounds a bit like Peter Greenaway meets *Helraiser* without most of the gore, though director Richard Kelly (*Donnie Darko*) might flinch at the comparison. Based on a story by Richard Matheson that was previously filmed as a *Twilight Zone* installment.



Pardon My French

The latest French comedy to hit Taiwanese screens stars Chiara Mastroianni (daughter of Marcello, also seen recently in *Park Benches*) as a sufferer of writer's block so profound that she begins using a different first name. To make matters worse, she inspires an infatuation in a younger woman who just won't stop being of use. Plot is not as important as tone and performances in this one, which should entertain Francophiles who enjoy offbeat material. Original title: *Un Chat un Chat*.



Ghost Train

Can't remember the last time an Indonesian film enjoyed a commercial release in Taiwan, so this ghostly ride is special for at least one reason. Horror fans might be interested in the grafting of other Asian filmmakers' horror motifs onto an Indonesian setting, though even more mainstream audiences might end up playing count-the-cliche. A girl disappears after boarding a late train; her sister and some dopey friends decide that they are best equipped to track her down despite paranormal activity in the paying area of the station. *The Midnight Meat Train* did all this better, and a lot bloodier.



The Ultimate Fight

We missed two Baixue theater offerings last week — one an apparent prequel to the German TV production *Day of Disaster*; the other an obscure animated film about dinosaurs ("Fantastic for all the family," said the ad, even if the same can't be said about the theater itself) — but if you're desperate for some sub-DVD-standard fare in a stuffy, nearly deserted theater, then no look further than *The Ultimate Fight* (1998, also known as *The Process*), starring kickboxing icon Ernie Reyes Jr and Ernie Reyes Sr as a character called "Senior." Reyes Jr is a foreigner who plunges into gangland violence on arrival in the US. It's the kind of action movie that has a character called "Hitler," but don't knock Mr Reyes: His latest gig was stunt work on *Avatar*.

