

FILM REVIEW

Softly, softly at the Oscars

'The Hurt Locker' gets under the tough carapace of US soldiers in Iraq without becoming sentimental or jumping to conclusions

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Now that it has picked up six Oscars, everyone has heard about *The Hurt Locker*, but all through 2009 it proved something of a sleeper, garnering critical acclaim but not much else. It is being touted as the lowest-grossing best picture winner ever, and its Taiwan release has been on hold since the middle of last year, likely because of concerns that this understated Iraq war movie was not going to cut it with local audiences.

Unlike many higher-profile though short-lived films that picked up on the potential of the Iraq war as movie material, *The Hurt Locker* does not feature any action star hot shots, and its story about a bomb disposal team working in Baghdad does not provide opportunities for much in the way of special effects. Even with its Oscar haul, it is likely to come out the loser against *The Green Zone*, with Matt Damon and the cachet of the *Bourne* movies behind it, which also opens today.

That would be sad, for *The Hurt Locker* is one of those unsettled and ambiguous films that improves with age and re-watching, and may well prove to be the classic war movie for the first part of the 21st century. The story is that of Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), who joins a bomb disposal unit after the death of their bomb technician, Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce), a capable and popular team leader.

James is not much of a team player, but exists in his own personal limbo, craving the excitement of coming face-to-face with unexploded ordnance and trying to understand the minds that set up these deadly devices. He is content to leave the

politics of engagement to others. This alone makes *The Hurt Locker* stand out from other Iraq war features.

James' relationship with Sergeant JT Sandborn, a cautious though capable soldier keen to play it by the book, and Specialist Owen Eldridge, who is gradually becoming unstuck as fear and confusion build within him, is at the heart of the movie — though it is a relationship that can be interpreted as representing the fragmented psychology behind the US engagement in this conflict.

James has a very narrow certainty about what he is about, but when his blinkered view is forced open, however momentarily, he is seen to be just as confused as the others.

James' wife makes a brief appearance, but essentially this is a guy film, and women and children are ideas that exist in a separate world that will not become a reality until the end of a rotation in Iraq. The fact that director Kathryn Bigelow has got beneath the tough carapace of these soldiers without getting sentimental is one of the film's many strengths.

The other is the space that Bigelow allows for interpretation. James' cavalier attitude toward his team puts lives at risk, but at the same time cuts through military BS and senseless precautions, as when he strips off his protective suit when working to disarm a car bomb that would obliterate everything for hundreds of meters if it went off. He would rather die comfortable, he says.

James takes a shine to an insolent Iraqi kid selling pirated DVDs. When the kid emerges alive after James believes him dead at the hands of bombmakers, he feels

betrayed rather than relieved. His mourning has been misplaced, and that is the fault of the Iraqis. You can see him battenning down the hatches after this brief experience of engagement. Real flesh-and-blood people are much more complex than abstractions, and James quickly returns to playing a lethal but impersonal game with the bombmakers he is pitted against.

Ralph Fiennes and David Morse make delightful cameos that lampoon the madness and meanness of the Iraq conflict, Fiennes as a bounty hunter capturing and killing high-value targets and Morse as a colonel who clearly sees the war as something of a mix between a great ball game and divine retribution.

It is the attitudes of the men faced with the challenge of surviving, rather than the ebb and flow of the conflict or any wider moral issues of whether the West should be involved in the conflict at all, that dominate the film. In this sense, it is a surprisingly intimate film, despite its big war zone setting.

Bigelow is no stranger to big movies about men, having directed *K-11: The Widowmaker* in 2002, but it is the psychology of the characters, rather than the window dressing of military style that interests her. Going head-to-head with ex-husband James Cameron, with his big-budget, big-spectacle picture *Avatar* at the Oscars, it is natural to cheer the success of the less ostentatious production. *The Hurt Locker* has the advantage of being a thoughtful film that still has its share of suspense, and deploys old-fashioned storytelling that ties up the narrative neatly without providing any easy answers.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Green Zone

Although the names have changed, Paul Greengrass' *Green Zone* starring Matt Damon might be titled "Bourne Does Baghdad." Built up in much the same style as the Bourne trilogy, the story is very, very loosely based on journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*. Although *Green Zone* tackles the ongoing issue of those hard-to-find weapons of mass destruction and therefore has a high degree of topicality, it is cut in much the same gun-and-run style as the two Greengrass *Bourne* films. Which is no bad thing: This is a high-quality action conspiracy flick made by people who know exactly what they are doing.

Brothers

English-language remake of the 2004 Danish film *Brothers*, the movie takes a look at the domestic fallout from the Afghanistan/Iraq wars. Directed by Ireland-born director Jim Sheridan, the film has been recast to deal specifically with the American experience of the conflict, and

follows the lines of the original quite closely. The films tells the story of two brothers, one an upstanding soldier, the other a no-good drifter. When his brother goes missing (presumed dead) in Afghanistan, the bad apple reaches out to his brother's wife. Strong script and an A-list cast that includes Jake Gyllenhaal, Natalie Portman and Tobey Maguire keep the film from getting too sudsy, and it has earned critical acclaim for its fine-textured presentation of family relationships under stress.

Dalai Lama Renaissance Vol. 2: A Revolution of Ideas

Following on from Khashyar Darvich's 2007 documentary *Dalai Lama Renaissance*, which screened in Taipei in June last year, this second part carries on the fascinating dialogue that the first began. Though the film centers around some very earnest talk among innovative thinkers — such as Fred Alan Wolf, a theoretical physicist, Vicki Robin, co-author of *Your Money or Your Life*, Harry Morgan Moses, a motivational corporate trainer, and Thomas Forsthoefel, an associate professor of religious studies — there is a philosophical humor and quirky pragmatism in the dialogue, more often than not injected by the Dalai Lama himself, which keeps the

film from becoming overly sanctimonious.

Des Illusions

A film written and directed by Etienne Faure, *Des Illusions* is one of those talkie would-be romances in the mold of Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004) diptych. In the case of *Des Illusions*, the exotic location where the protagonists meet is Ibiza, providing plenty of lovely scenery if you get tired of looking at the two extremely attractive stars. Florent (Aurelien Wiik), a successful writer, meets Sylvie (Catherine Wilkening). Through long walks and talks, a romance springs up between the two, but then their lives outside Ibiza gradually begin to pull them apart. So sad, so romantic, so French.

Did You Hear About the Morgans?

Hugh Grant and Sarah Jessica Parker do themselves no favors in *Did You Hear About the Morgans?*, which has received stinking reviews as about the least funny and least



THE HURT LOCKER

DIRECTED BY:
KATHRYN BIGELOW

STARRING:
JEREMY RENNER (STAFF SERGEANT WILLIAM JAMES), ANTHONY MACKIE (SERGEANT JT SANBORN), BRIAN GERAGHTY (SPECIALIST OWEN ELDRIDGE), GUY PEARCE (STAFF SERGEANT MATT THOMPSON), RALPH FIENNES (CONTRACTOR TEAM LEADER), DAVID MORSE (COLONEL REED), EVANGELINE LILLY (CONNIE JAMES)

RUNNING TIME:
131 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

comic films you are likely to see this year. Grant continues his endless stint as a congenial moron, which was so much fun in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) but which is long past expiration. Jessica Parker trots out her Carrie Bradshaw persona, which is also becoming rather shopworn. They are a high-powered Manhattan couple forced to slum it in a rural setting after witnessing a murder. Sound familiar? Remember *For Richer or For Poorer* (1997)? Some relief to be found in the roles of Sam Elliott and Mary Steenburgen, but not enough to make *The Morgans* interesting enough to care about.

Snakes and Earrings

Japanese flick adapted from a novella by Hitomi Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings* tries to be the voice of a new depraved generation, featuring plenty of body modification, sadomasochism, death fantasies and soulless sex. The English title conveys a more artistic shading than the Japanese title, which refers directly to a body-mod fetish for splitting the tongue to make it fork like a snake's. Lots of pain and discomfort are meted out and received in the name of erotic gratification, giving the film a blend of art house and soft porn.

FILM REVIEW



Tahar Rahim stars in *A Prophet*, directed by Jacques Audiard.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

Bloody deeds

French director Jacques Audiard's newest film examines prison politics and the path to power

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

A Prophet, a French prison drama about the evolution of a small-time street punk into a manipulative criminal mastermind, might have been edged out of a best foreign language film spot at the Oscars (the winner, the Argentinean *The Secret in Their Eyes* is scheduled for release in May), but it is a magnificently assured work that bares comparison with classics such as *Scarface* (1983) and *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984). *A Prophet* does not aspire to the grand panorama of these Hollywood epics, but makes up with intimacy and detail for what it lacks in breadth.

The film opens with Malik El Djebena (Tahar Rahim), who has just graduated out of juvenile detention, being sent to an adult prison for an assault on a police officer. He is an outsider in every sense. To the dominant prison gang of Corsicans he is a "dirty Arab," while the Muslim population regard him as a half-caste without religious affiliation. He is clearly bait.

He comes under the wing of crime boss Cesar Luciani (Niels Arestrup), who runs an extensive criminal operation from within the prison walls. When Ryad, an Arab prisoner who could testify against him is admitted to the prison, Malik is told to meet him for sex and kill him. This is to be done with a razor blade hidden under his lip. Malik is no killer, at least not yet. He tries to inform the prison authorities and gets a short, sharp lesson about who really runs the prison. It's enough. Malik may be short on experience, but he sees the world through clear eyes. While Malik lacks moral principles, he also is without self-pity. He is a blank slate upon which his prison experience will write.

The murder is committed. It is a confused, bloody affair, and with this Malik obtains some degree of protection. Director Jacques Audiard avoids any kind of glorification, making the murder a dirty business from its beginning as a sexual tease to the spasmodic death throes.

Malik is taken on as a kind of dog's body to the Corsican gang, the members of which despise him but learn to use him as a link to the Arab prisoners. From here on in, Malik is constantly learning, taking on any task, no matter how demeaning, to advance his own position. He learns to read from well-meaning prison teachers, and he learns to plot from Luciani, who he watches closely even as he fetches bread and makes coffee for the gang. He is working toward his own salvation.

Rahim does a spectacular job in fleshing out Malik's character, from the empty vessel that arrives in prison to the increasingly adept criminal. At no point does Malik come over as evil, he just takes color from the world he finds around him in order to survive. His mentor is Reyeb, the first man he kills, who follows him as a voice of conscience (albeit utterly amoral) through the story. Reyeb tells his murderer-to-be that he should try and come out of prison a little cleverer than when he went in. In this he succeeds all too well.

A Prophet takes its time with the story, lingering with sociological detail over aspects of prison life, and we watch with fascination as Malik's life fills out first with material possessions, and then with aspirations to power. He becomes friends with another North African, Ryad (Adel Bencherif), who later becomes the man on the outside who helps run a smuggling ring for Malik. It is a friendship that gives the latter his first taste of social responsibility. Malik becomes godfather to Ryad's son, and takes over the care of his wife after he dies.

Luciani's (Niels Arestrup) is a powerful supporting role, his pale stare creating an almost palpable sense of assurance that is in direct contrast to Malik's fledgling efforts to sculpt his own identity. As the movie progresses, the balance shifts. This is the dynamic that gives this long film its robustness, letting it combine an almost documentary fascination with the rituals of prison life and a strong dramatic arc that keeps the audience locked into the story.

Film Notes

A PROPHET (UN PROPHETE)

DIRECTED BY:
JACQUES AUDIARD

STARRING:
TAHAR RAHIM (MALIK EL DJEBENA), NIELS ARESTRUP (CESAR LUCIANI), ADEL BENCHERIF (RYAD), HICHEM YACOUBI (REYEB), REDA KATEB (JORDI), JEAN-PHILIPPE RICCI (VETTORI)

RUNNING TIME:
155 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
FRENCH, ARABIC AND CORSICAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

