

## FILM REVIEW

From left: Kim Cattrall, Olivia Williams, Ewan McGregor and Pierce Brosnan star in *The Ghost Writer*, directed by Roman Polanski.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GATCHPLAY

## Half the truth is often a whole lie

In *'The Ghost Writer,'* a biographer finds himself in the firing line after he discovers skeletons in a former prime minister's closet

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

Roman Polanski, whatever his own private troubles, proves once again that he is a great filmmaker able to handle even something as insubstantial as Robert Harris' political potboiler *The Ghost* and make a film that is intricately layered and resonant, giving added dimensions to its source material.

In this instance, the film, while notable mostly for its fine craftsmanship rather than any aspirations to great artistic heights, is arguably a more effective medium for Harris' story about intrigue unwittingly unearthed by a writer working on a political memoir.

The unnamed ghostwriter, a fine mix of jaded hack and seasoned professional, is played by Ewan McGregor, who wonderfully conveys how much his character is a fish out of water when he is pulled out of his celebrity biography niche and plopped unceremoniously into the seductive and much more dangerous world of politics.

Other members of the cast are brilliantly deployed, not least Pierce Brosnan as former pro-US British prime minister Adam Lang, who stands charged

with war crimes for abetting the rendition of terrorism suspects.

Brosnan effortlessly conjures up a thick layer of well-manicured charm, and unlike his usual suave onscreen persona, allows glimpses behind the scenes into an inner world filled with lies, or at least various half-truths and compromises that he can no longer distinguish from the political spin that has built up around them in his own mind.

Lang's many similarities to former British prime minister Tony Blair, including his adept media skills, give this political thriller a topical aspect that Polanski allows to linger in the background without any explicit comment.

Another powerful performance comes from Olivia Williams as Ruth, Lang's brainy but now embittered wife, who lurks in the background of her husband's life and knows a lot more than she is letting on.

Set against her husband's glossy facade, Ruth's sinister presence is appealing; she helps generate a mood of unease and draws the coldness of the landscape surrounding the Martha's Vineyard house where the action takes

place into the hearts of those living there.

Polanski makes great use of big picture windows and an almost Brutalist interior to build up the atmosphere still further, and while nothing much seems to be happening, an impending sense of disaster is maintained from the get-go.

Kim Cattrall, Samantha from *Sex and the City*, is an unexpected presence as Amelia, Lang's personal assistant and mistress, whose suave, efficient ways, neat black suits and moments of vulnerability contrast well against Ruth.

Sexual tension is a minor theme in *The Ghost Writer*, but it is deftly woven through the fabric of the story with cutting moments of dialogue.

As befits a film about a writer and a book, words are the main weapons of this thriller, which shuns car chases and guns for something more sinister: an omnipresent yet largely invisible threat of death to anyone who delves too deep into the past.

This sophisticated and low-key treatment is tremendously refreshing, and provides an excellent alternative to Angelina Jolie's *Salt*, which opened last week.

### Film Notes

#### THE GHOST WRITER

DIRECTED BY:  
ROMAN POLANSKI

STARRING:  
EWAN MCGREGOR  
(THE GHOST), JON BERNTHAL  
(RICK RICARDELLI), KIM CATTRALL  
(AMELIA BLY), PIERCE BROSNAN  
(ADAM LANG), TIM PREECE (ROY),  
JAMES BELUSHI (JOHN MADDOX),  
OLIVIA WILLIAMS (RUTH LANG)

RUNNING TIME:  
128 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

## FILM REVIEW

# Careful, that test tube might be incubating a baby monster

Director Vincenzo Natali hasn't reinvented horror with *'Splice,'* but the movie nonetheless takes audiences on a seriously scary thrill ride

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The two recognizable stars of *Splice*, a pleasurable shivery, sometimes delightfully icky horror movie about love and monsters in the age of genetic engineering, are Adrien Brody and Sarah Polley, a well-matched pair of earthbound oddities. Given their respective performative idiosyncrasies and, as important, their singularly nontraditional beauty, the pair's casting immediately signals that the director Vincenzo Natali is after something different. With Polley and Brody on board, there's a chance that despite the big-studio brands on the movie, you're not headed into genre purgatory with the usual disposable plastic people who often populate (and perish in) mainstream horror. When these two bleed, you might actually care.

That's a good thing, and it helps explain how *Splice* delivers for the horror movie fan who has grown weary of being suckered by films that promise new frights only to deliver the same old buckets of gore and guts. Polley

and Brody play Clive and Elsa, live-in lovers and rock-star bio-engineers (they're on the cover of *Wired*), who are creating new organisms from the DNA of different animals. The money bankrolling them comes from a pharmaceutical outfit, one of those shady corporations that occasionally foot the bill in movies of this sort. Such is the case in *The Fly*, David Cronenberg's 1986 film, another cautionary tale about genetic mayhem that Natali appears to have absorbed into his own aesthetic DNA.

The Cronenberg influence here is evident in Natali's interest in the body and birth and in an initially subdued, near-narcoleptic atmosphere that helps build a nice sense of foreboding. *Splice* opens with Clive and Elsa ushering their latest entity into the world, an event partly shot from the newborn's point of view. "He's so cute," Elsa says, beaming. The he is a writhing, vaguely penile blob, Fred, which is soon introduced to a second blob, Ginger. (Natali, who wrote the script with Antoinette Terry Bryant and Doug Taylor,



Some mothers do have them.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IM MEDIA

likes his allusions: Clive is most likely a homage to Colin Clive, who played Dr. Frankenstein in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*, with Elsa Lanchester as the memorably shocked betrothed.)

Although Fred's point-of-view shot might seem like a throwaway, it's fundamental to Natali's design. Point-of-view shots don't necessarily put you in a character's (in this case, metaphorical) shoes, but because they let you see what a character sees, allowing you to

share his or her perspective, they can create a sense of empathy for the character. In this case, though, empathy with Fred seems less the point than what it is we see through his eyes: Clive and Elsa, fully masked and dressed in laboratory clothes, working in the slightly sickly greenish light of a laboratory bought and paid for by a big company playing at God. This is the vision of Clive and Elsa that Natali wants you to remember, despite all that comes next.

### Film Notes

#### SPICE

DIRECTED BY:  
VINCENZO NATALI

STARRING:  
ADRIEN BRODY (CLIVE NICOLIA),  
SARAH POLLEY (ELSA KAST), ABIGAIL  
CHU (YOUNG DREN), DELPHINE  
CHANEAC (ADULT DREN)

RUNNING TIME:  
104 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

And my, what a lot of unnerving fun comes next, including a spectacular splash of blood, a fall from grace, some true relationship talk and an impulsive, cataclysmically wrongheaded decision. Fred and Ginger, alas, make an abrupt exit, leaving Clive

and Elsa close to losing their funds. Inspiration strikes, and a new creature is born, a real doozy that's initially christened H-50 and, after some growing pains (for everyone), Dren. A sensational, vividly realistic being, Dren is a seamless amalgam of computer-generated effects, mechanical effects and human performance — played as a child by Abigail Chu and as an adult by Delphine Chaneac — that scuttles, slithers and vaults into the horror cinema annals. A mutant is born.

Natali handles Dren's eerie entrance into the world with near-flawless timing and a thickening air of dread. Working with Robert Munroe (the visual-effects supervisor) and Howard Berger (special makeup and creature effects), Natali has fashioned a creature that, with her tail, skinned-chicken legs and cleft head alternately looks as harmless as a bunny and like something that might leap out from Ridley Scott's *Alien* (or, scarier yet, a David Lynch film). Still, for Elsa, Dren is no mere experiment: She's a test-tube baby, one that comes with the emotional and psychologi-

cal weight of an in-utero conception. And the bigger Dren gets — she soon grows arms that hug Elsa tight — the deeper the bond between the two and the greater the trouble for Elsa and Clive.

Watching Dren develop — from newt to child to va-va-voom adult — you understand why *Splice* attracted the support of the director Guillermo del Toro, one of its seven executive producers. Natali, whose earlier films include *Cube*, hasn't reinvented the horror genre. But with *Splice* he has done the next best thing with an intelligent movie that, in between its small boos and an occasional hair-raising jolt, explores chewy issues like bioethics, abortion, corporate-sponsored science, commitment problems between lovers and even Freudian-worthy family dynamics. The shivers might often outweigh the scares, and Natali loses his way in the last half-hour. Yet working with actors who make you care and a neo-Frankenstein creation that touchingly does, too, he has become one of the genre's new great fright hopes.

## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

### The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Inspired by the 1940 Walt Disney musical animation *Fantasia*, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, directed by Jon Turteltaub, who gave us the dubious pleasures of *National Treasure* back in 2004, is an exercise in taking something that was successful once and shooting it full of CGI steroids to make it a bigger and more powerful cinematic experience. Unfortunately, while the visual effects are spectacular, what passes for the plot is an overwrought pastiche of teen romance and Gothic fantasy. It boasts a few big names, including Nicolas Cage, Monica Bellucci and Alfred Molina, along with a starring role for Jay Baruchel (from the recently released *She's Out of My League*). Baruchel is an average guy who finds he has hidden powers and teams up as a reluctant protege of Cage's sorcerer Balthazar Black to save New York.



### Paris Express

Released internationally as *Coursier*, this action comedy from France stars Michael Youn as Sam, a regular-guy motorcycle courier who gets caught up in a big-time diamond heist on his way to attend his girlfriend's sister's wedding. There is plenty of Gallic emoting and trowel-loads of *Taxi*-style driving set pieces as the hapless Sam, who, try as he might, never seems to get his express deliveries to their destination on time. Fast-paced action takes place in many well-known scenic spots around Paris, and splashes of humor enliven the journey. But as with the whole *Taxi* franchise, from which *Paris Express* is clearly just a spin-off, the journey, while exciting enough while it lasts, is quickly forgotten. Throwaway entertainment.



### From the Beginning (Do Comeco ao Fim)

The story of an unnaturally close relationship between Francisco and half-brother Thomas develops a seize-the-day idea of romantic and physical love, though some audiences may find the childhood scenes of erotic discovery just a little creepy. As the young sibling lovers emerge into adulthood, there is even more opportunity for the camera to linger over well-toned male bodies, not least as Thomas makes it onto the Brazilian Olympic swimming team. A big hit at the 2010 Taipei Film Festival, this mixture of beefcake and incest is likely to play mainly to a niche audience.



### The Fallen Angle (Ningen Shikkaku)

Another adaptation from the fiction of the death-obsessed author Osamu Dazai, whose work has already received cinematic treatment in *Villon's Wife* by Kichitaro Negishi, which opened here early this year. *The Fallen Angle* is by director Genjiro Arato, who has made a name for himself in treating difficult subjects such as incest and child abuse. While some of the themes echo those found in *Villon's Wife*, the casting fails the film. The self-destructive anti-hero Yozo Oba is played by entertainer Toma Ikuta, who is unable to find any depth to his character, making this an exercise in the portrayal of casual degeneracy that, at more than two hours, is likely to have audiences hoping that Oba will quickly put an end to his existence so they can get out of the theater.



### The Crocodiles (Vorstadtkrokodile)

German kids' movie about a gang of local children who end up going head to head with a real criminal gang, and, you guessed it, they use ingenuity to outwit the stronger enemy. This take on the *Home Alone* theme is an action film well suited to young audiences. Director Christian Ditter picked up the Audience Award and the MovieSquad Junior Award at the Cinekid Festival last year. A positive take is given to disabilities, as one of the children is confined to a wheelchair and finds that while the others might have legs, he's got supercharged wheels. Good, clean fun.



### Pokemon 13: Phantom Ruler Zoroark

Pokemon anime dates back to 1997, and this 13th in the series of feature film treatments continues the adventures of the pocket monsters, creations of the manga, computer game and merchandising industry, who are once again involved in an adventure that may be comprehensible to fans but which will certainly be utterly bizarre to those who have not been initiated into these arcane mysteries. For fans and the very young.

