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## The latest in elective surgery will relieve you of that nagging soul

Paul Giamatti plays Paul Giamatti in a film that should appeal to fans of Charlie Kaufman's work

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

If anyone looks as if he might be in the possession of a troubled soul, it's the actor Paul Giamatti. With his doubting eyes and gently defeated posture, he tends to come across as a man carrying a burden, though one not necessarily or wholly of his making. You can almost see the distress resting heavy and hard on his sloped shoulders, pushing out against his ovoid head, tugging at his lower eyelids and worrying his lips.

In *Cold Souls*, a story about life's anguished weight, Giamatti plays a role for which he is exceptionally, perhaps even uniquely qualified: an actor named Paul Giamatti, thereafter known as Paul. When the movie opens, Paul is rehearsing a scene from Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* with obvious effort and concentration. "I'm a madman," he proclaims. "I'm 47 years old." It's the final act of the play and Uncle Vanya is loudly expressing his vast disappointment. If only, he continues (and here the translation differs from other versions), "If I could only live what's left in a different way." In the play the next voice is that of his friend, a doctor, who, with palpable irritation, tells Vanya to shut it.

The next speaker in the film, though, is Paul himself, who angrily cuts off the

rehearsal. *Uncle Vanya* is, among other things, about disappointed lives and thwarted desires and the continuing performances we call our lives. In many respects the same holds true for *Cold Souls*, an ambitious, elegantly shot, tonally cool first feature written and directed by Sophie Barthes that shows hints of Stanley Kubrick and Charlie Kaufman both. Yet unlike Vanya, the on-screen character called Paul Giamatti, who may or may not be similar to the public figure — the versatile, heroically ordinary-looking actor from films like *Sideways* and the HBO series *John Adams* — doesn't appear to have much to regret.

He lives comfortably and apparently with some happiness with his beautiful wife, Claire (Emily Watson). He has an agent who phones him rather than the reverse. And he's playing Uncle Vanya in a New York production, a plum gig. But something is troubling Paul, gnawing at him and eroding his performance, or so he believes. It's not a tragedy, the theater director (Michael Tucker) kindly reminds him after Paul brings rehearsals to an abrupt, angrily frustrated stop. Yet the play isn't a comedy either. It's something in between, something like life, a blurring that thwarts Paul. His already rounded shoulders

and bent head droop even further. And then he does something that every artist should be wary of: He listens to his agent.

The agent points toward a possible solution to Paul's woes: Soul Storage, a company that extracts and stores souls, and on the conveniently close Roosevelt Island, no less. It's a preposterous hook, of course, but Barthes introduces her absurd premise with deadpan restraint. In this she has great help from the dryly funny David Strathairn as doctor Flintstein, who runs the company with his assistant, Stephanie (an underused, decorative Lauren Ambrose). With little ado Flintstein persuades Paul to relinquish his soul in a swift, painless process that extracts it as if it were a zit. Afterward Paul is horrified to discover that his soul looks — and, as he rattles it inside its glass container, sounds — exactly like a chickpea.

"How can such a tiny thing feel so heavy?" Flintstein marvels. In *Uncle Vanya* the heaviness is unbearable, essential, inescapable: "We must go on living," a character says with wrenching finality. Barthes more or less comes to the same conclusion, but she complicates her film in ways that suggest she has trouble accepting such a seemingly modest (say,

chickpea-size) conclusion. And so, early on, she introduces Paul's narrative counterpart, Nina (Dina Korzun), a beautiful melancholic who smuggles black-market Russian souls into the U.S. Like Paul, Nina is a performer (she passes through immigration using counterfeit fingerprints) and overburdened with soul, in this case the traces of smuggled souls that linger in her memory like the flickering images from barely remembered old movies.

Initially united only through the editing that toggles between them, Paul and Nina eventually meet in person. There is much to admire in their scenes together, particularly after Paul's soul has gone amusingly if not tragically missing in Russia. There he finds a soap-opera star who yearns for the soul of Al Pacino (a very good Kathryn Winnick) and witnesses desperate people selling the most intimate part of their being. He also looks into his own soul, and while it brings tears to his eyes, it, much like the Russian subplot, proves disappointingly banal, which might be true to life but is an artistic letdown. In this attractive, smart-enough, finally un-brave movie Barthes peeks at the dark comedy of the soul only to beat a quick, pre-emptive retreat.

### Film Notes

#### COLD SOULS

DIRECTED BY:  
SOPHIE BARTHES

#### STARRING:

PAUL GIAMATTI (PAUL GIAMATTI), DAVID STRATHAIRN (DR FLINTSTEIN), DINA KORZUN (NINA), KATHERYN WINNICK (SVETA), LAUREN AMBROSE (STEPHANIE), EMILY WATSON (CLAIRE), MICHAEL TUCKER (THEATER DIRECTOR)

RUNNING TIME:  
101 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

### Horror Fever 2010 Film Festival (2010恐怖驚選影展)

Distributor CatchPlay is putting on a feast for horror and slasher fans with the Horror Fever 2010 Film Festival, which opens today and runs until Sept. 3. The festival is screening films from across the wide-ranging horror genre and pulls no punches, with movies such as French director Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*, which has sickened many a critic with its graphic brutality, the most recent George Romero film, *Survival of the Dead*, atmospheric horror such as Adam Green's *Frozen* and a couple of spooky South Korean flicks. The festival's lineup of 10 films have not yet had a major release in Taiwan, a fact that distinguishes this event from rehabs of limited or special-release films that often pass as film festivals. All screenings are at the Shin Kong Cineplex (台北新光影城), located at 36 Xining S Rd, Taipei City (台北市西寧南路36號). Individual tickets are NT\$175 and a book of five tickets is NT\$750. Information and screening times can be found at the festival's Web site: www.catchplay.com/HorrorFever.



### Aftershock (唐山大地震)

Set against the background of the Great Tangshan Earthquake of 1976, this massive Chinese production by the highly acclaimed director Feng Xiaogang (馮小剛) tells of the trauma inflicted by life-and-death decisions forced on a mother of two children caught in the 23-second cataclysm. The earthquake and its aftermath are graphically rendered, making the most of IMAX treatment, but collapsing buildings and earth-shattering destruction provide only some of the draw for this film. The real aftershock is the emotional impact on survivors. Feng deals with issues of guilt, abandonment and redemption over an epic canvas that spans more than three decades following the actual tremor. This is big-budget melodrama, with strong performances from an experienced cast, and Zhang Ling (張翎), the director's wife, in the leading role.



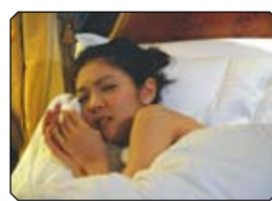
### City Under Siege (全城戒備)

A relatively big-budget Hong Kong futuristic cop drama by Benny Chan (陳木勝), who brought us the dubious pleasures of the *Gen-X Cops* (特警新人類) franchise and also directed Jackie Chan (成龍) in the better-than-average *New Police Story* (新警察故事). The bizarre story line of *City Under Siege*, which features Aaron Kwok (郭富城) as a circus clown called Sunny, has a bunch of circus performers acquiring superhuman attributes after being accidentally exposed to biochemicals while engaged in a heist. The group members subsequently turn against each other, and their conflict provides the basis for some superhero action. Reporter Angel, played by Shu Qi (舒淇), follows the story, and predictably gets entangled in it.



### Break Up Club (分手說愛你)

Starring Jaysee Chan (房祖名) and singer Fiona Sit (薛凱琪), *Break Up Club's* premise is edgily urban and computer savvy, but the film never gets beyond the paint-by-numbers Hong Kong rom-com formula. The story centers on a Web site that allows users to win back their former boyfriend or girlfriend. The price: willingness to break up another happy couple. One of the causes of a breakup is the secret videotaping of a sexual encounter between lovers, which might pass for a topical reference, given the fondness of some local celebrities for leaking sex tapes to the media. The film is really just another excuse for beautiful young people to emote, flash fashion and gadgets at each other, get their kit off and pretend to be in love.



### Vampires Suck

Utterly depressing spoof of vampire movies by the team that takes a humorous look at horror, romance and disaster movies and brought us the *Scary Movie* franchise, *Date Movie*, *Disaster Movie* and *Meet the Spartans*. *Vampires Suck* is predictably aimed at the *Twilight* series of films, and takes the usual heavy-handed approach to squeezing humor out of material that many people might already regard as laughable. *Vampires Suck* will appeal to fans of the parody film duo Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer, but probably to few others.



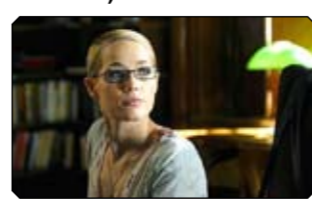
### Soul Kitchen

An intelligent comedy by German-Turkish director Fatih Akin finds its setting in the multicultural tidal pools of wrong-side-of-the-tracks Hamburg where restaurant owner Zinos, who runs a popular local eatery, sees his life plunged into chaos when his brother gets out of prison, his girlfriend moves to Shanghai and he acquires a prima donna chef who alienates his regulars with fancy cooking. An incident-packed script juggles Marx Brothers' craziness with deft character development and brings the large cast of eccentrics and oddballs that populate the film into sharp relief. Smart social comedy that doubles as a love letter to the underbelly of Hamburg life.



### The Case of Unfaithful Klara (Il Caso Dell'Infedele Klara)

European co-production based on a novel by the best-selling Czech author Michal Viewegh, who has made a successful career writing humorous stories about modern romantic relationships. *The Case of Unfaithful Klara* is set in Prague and tells the story of a man who hires a detective to investigate the suspected infidelity of his girlfriend, Klara.



This action sets off a series of events that spin out of control, ending up with final revelations taking place in Venice. Plentiful bedroom action and scenic backdrops fail to make up for pedestrian filmmaking.

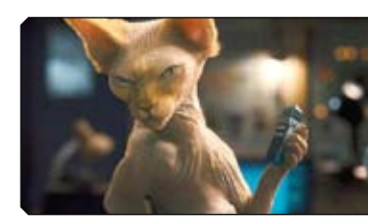
### The Hole

Not to be confused with the 2001 British movie of the same name, *The Hole* by director Joe Dante combines horror and some family-friendly thrills, and exploits 3D to get the most out of its claustrophobic setting. (It picked up the best 3D picture award at last year's Venice Film Festival.) The film tells the story of a pair of brothers and their neighbor who discover a huge and seemingly infinitely large cavern concealed beneath their homes. The script is by Mark Smith, who also wrote the two *Vacancy* movies, and while the idea that the dark underground corridors lead the way into inner fears is not new, the visual impact and the use of 3D technology pays off, even if the clever conceit that blurs the line between actual horror and frightening imaginings falls flat in the third act.



### Cats and Dogs: The Revenge of Kitty Galore

*Cats and Dogs* was a minor success in 2001 but its sequel hung in production limbo for almost a decade. *Cats and Dogs: The Revenge of Kitty Galore* proves that it should have stayed there. The story about a police dog and a slinky feline who put their differences behind them to take down Kitty Galore, a rogue feline superspy, relies heavily on canine and feline jokes and references to a slew of other movies from *Scarface* to *Get Smart*, and for that matter, the James Bond franchise. There is some decent voice work, with the likes of Nick Nolte, Christina Applegate and Roger Moore, and a particularly fine performance by Bette Midler as the pussycat of the title.



### Magical Girl, Lyrical Nanoha — The Movie 1

A feature film adaptation of a Japanese anime television series that was originally released in 2004. The series was sufficiently successful to warrant an English-language distribution. The story is about a girl called Nanoha Takamachi, who joins forces with a young wizard called Yuno to recover a set of magical artifacts. She learns magic from Yuno, which helps her in a battle with her wizard enemies. While all this is going on, she also tries to get on with her ordinary life as an elementary school student. For manga and anime fans only.

