

## FILM REVIEW



## A law unto itself

F. Gary Gray's latest offering takes on a big subject with an outstanding lack of gravitas

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

**L**aw Abiding Citizen, a blunt and sadistic revenge thriller starring Jamie Foxx and Gerard Butler, occasionally pauses from the mayhem to stage a solemn debate about law, justice and morality. Butler, playing a family man whose wife and daughter were murdered by thugs, feels he was let down by the system, which gave one of the thugs a light sentence in exchange for testimony against the other thug, who was sentenced to death. Foxx, the prosecutor who made that deal, thinks that the system, however imperfect, did its job.

But really, *Law Abiding Citizen* has about as much to say about real-life legal issues as *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen* had to say about defense policy. And it has less ethical gravity than any three of the *Saw* movies. Though it sometimes puts on a serious face, this movie, directed with snarling, snappish style by F. Gary Gray (*The Italian Job*), wears its preposterousness with a certain pride. It's about the cat-and-mouse game between two very smart guys, and it's perfectly happy to be as dumb as it wants.

Nick Rice, Foxx's character, is slick and ambitious, proud of his 96 percent conviction rate and quite sure that he's the cleverest and coolest person in the room. This does not seem like much of a stretch for Foxx, who is cashing in on his Oscar rather than going after a second one. Butler, for his

## Film Notes

## LAW ABIDING CITIZEN

DIRECTED BY:  
F. GARY GRAY

## STARRING:

JAMIE FOXX (CLYDE RICE), GERARD BUTLER (CLYDE SHELTON), LESLIE BIBB (SARAH LOWELL), BRUCE MCGILL (JONAS CANTRELL), COLM MEANEY (DETECTIVE DUNNIGAN), VIOLA DAVIS (MAYOR APRIL HENRY), MICHAEL IRBY (DETECTIVE SEAN GARZA), REGINA HALL (KELLY RICE), GREGORY ITZIN (WARDEN IGER)

RUNNING TIME:  
108 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

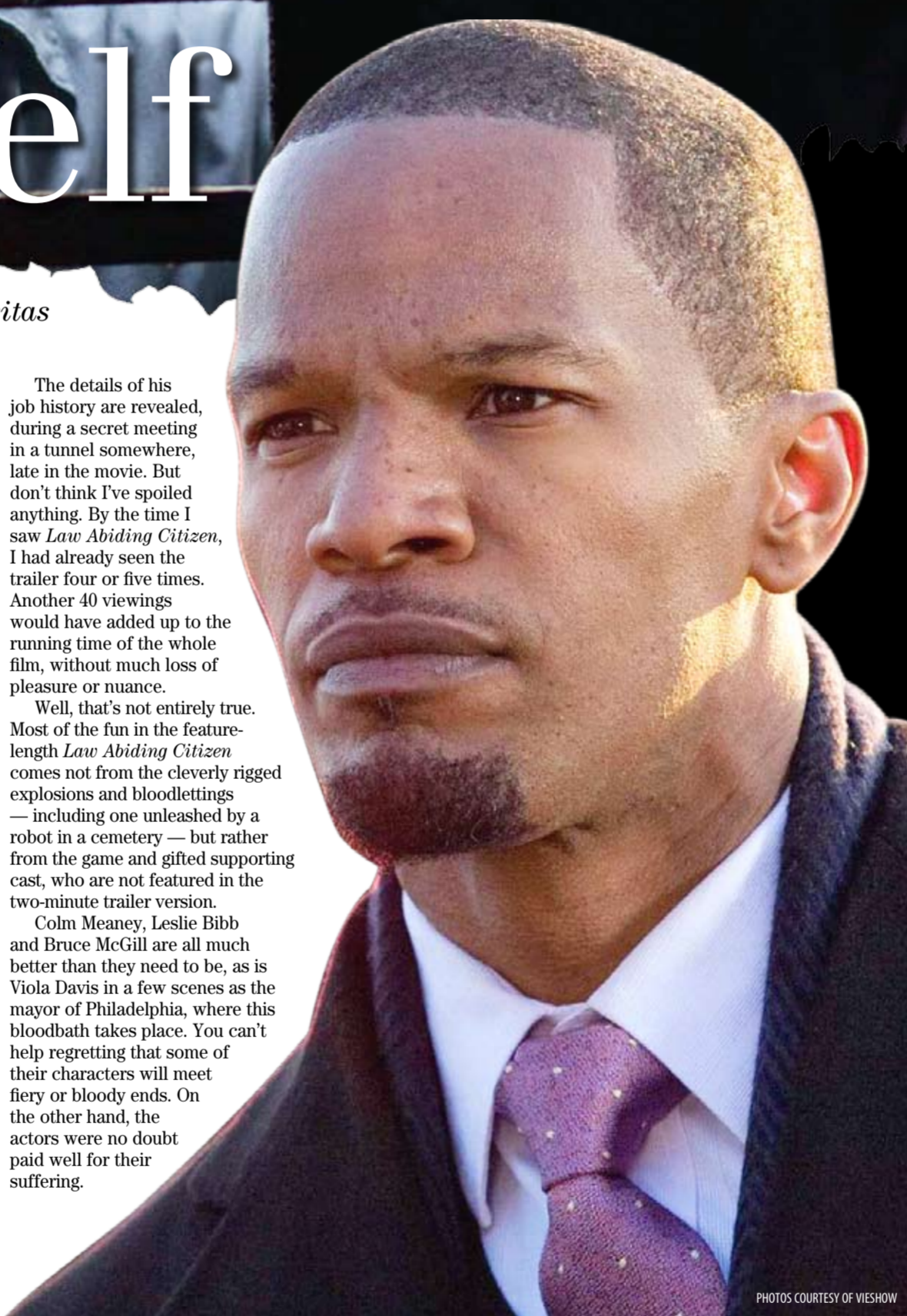
The details of his job history are revealed, during a secret meeting in a tunnel somewhere, late in the movie. But don't think I've spoiled anything. By the time I saw *Law Abiding Citizen*, I had already seen the trailer four or five times. Another 40 viewings would have added up to the running time of the whole film, without much loss of pleasure or nuance.

Well, that's not entirely true. Most of the fun in the feature-length *Law Abiding Citizen* comes not from the cleverly rigged explosions and bloodlettings — including one unleashed by a robot in a cemetery — but rather from the game and gifted supporting cast, who are not featured in the two-minute trailer version.

Colm Meaney, Leslie Bibb and Bruce McGill are all much better than they need to be, as is Viola Davis in a few scenes as the mayor of Philadelphia, where this bloodbath takes place. You can't help regretting that some of their characters will meet fiery or bloody ends. On the other hand, the actors were no doubt paid well for their suffering.

part, displays a surliness that many in Hollywood seem to mistake for charisma, and suffers the anguish of violent bereavement as if it were an annoying gastrointestinal ailment.

His character, Clyde Shelton, returns 10 years after the death of his family to tie up some loose ends. He dispatches the thugs, willingly goes to prison and starts doing dinner theater Hannibal Lecter for Foxx's benefit. "Some lessons must be learned in blood," Clyde declares, one of many portentous proverbs that he seems to have learned during his career as a military killing-gizmo specialist.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VIESHOW

## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

## The Storm Warriors (風雲II)

The Pang brothers, Danny (彭發) and Oxide (彭順), are back, this time helming a sequel to the 1998 Hong Kong action fantasy *Storm Riders* (風雲). Returning from that cast is Aaron Kwok (郭富城) as Cloud and Ekin Cheng (鄭伊健) as Wind, though not Sonny Chiba or Shu Qi (舒淇), sadly. Even so, there's fun to be had as Cloud and Wind battle the evil Lord Godless (Simon Yam, 任達華). Fans of this kind of movie — that is to say, those who can tolerate endless use of CGI — are very happy with the frenetic result. The visuals, updated special effects and studio-bound production design suggest a Chinese version of Zack Snyder's *300*. Part III is on the way.



## Jump (跳出去)

"Small town girl" Kitty Zhang (張雨綺) heads to Shanghai with dreams of becoming a dancer. There she falls in with the hip-hop crowd and attracts the romantic interest of a wealthy businessman. As naive and superficial as any dance movie could be, not least because of the East Asian sanitization of American music and dance culture, but its target market would hardly care. More critical to its success is the involvement of Stephen Chow (周星馳), who wrote the story on which the screenplay is based and which is peppered with humor, slapstick and youthful energy.



## Super Typhoon (超強颱風)

This profitable disaster movie screened at a recent festival of Chinese product, and seems to have impressed enough people to get a Taiwanese theatrical release ahead of much worthier titles. It may also be trying to ride on the wave of *2012*, which would be a big mistake. Still, what's to hate about a 21st century Chinese film in which the hero is an honest mayor? Super Typhoon Blue Whale bears down on a southern city, and there's nothing any of the stock characters can do about it, though if *Variety* is to be believed, most of the damage in this inadvertently funny movie is inflicted on miniature sets and a few reused cars. Oh, and watch out for the creature that lurks beneath.



## The Other Man

IT company boss Liam Neeson hunts down and, over chess, conversationally probes a man he believes to have had an affair with his wife, a designer of expensive shoes. The "other man" is Antonio Banderas, which would be enough to worry any level-headed husband. Underwhelmed reviewers scoffed at the film's twists while wondering what could have been with this cast. Others might ask why they should care about the grim obsessions of such characters when they can tune in for the latest Tiger Woods update.



## Tomorrow at Dawn

The promotional materials may suggest a period piece, but this French tale of military role-playing and dueling is mostly set in the present day. Musician Vincent Perez (*Queen Margot*) gets involved in a Napoleonic re-enactment to bond with his brother Jeremie Renier (*In Bruges*) and finds that his brother's weekend warrior pals take their play-acting rather seriously. Mixed reviews greeted this film by Denis Dercourt, himself a professional musician.



## Asia Pacific Film Festival

It's the 53rd time around for this enduring event. Of less interest, perhaps, is the selection of Taiwanese films, which have mostly finished their theatrical dates. Instead, look out for an interesting selection of titles from Iran, Indonesia and South Korea, among other Asian countries. Runs for four days from next Thursday at E-DA World in Kaohsiung County. More details at [www.53apff2009.com](http://www.53apff2009.com).



## FILM REVIEW



## Gloom in the room

'Paranormal Activity,' full of fleeting frights, was made on a budget of US\$10,000 — and it shows

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

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

**P**aranormal Activity is a crudely made, half-clever little frightener that has become something of a pop-culture sensation and most certainly the movie marketing story of the year. Midnight showings in US college towns and then in big cities, announced through minimal, viral publicity, have generated frenzied word of mouth and long lines at the box office.

And now, to capitalize on this success, Paramount is giving the movie, written and directed by Oren Peli on a minuscule budget of US\$10,000, a full commercial release. It won't be the same, though. At the midnight screening I attended in October, by far the most entertaining thing about the movie was the audience.

"Oh no. Oh hell no." That was a stocky gentleman in the row behind me, whimpering as a door swung open on-screen. There was a lot of screaming later on — when, for example, the same door slammed shut — and also laughter, both anxious and mirthful. There was, above all, the sense of a communal, half-clandestine good time that is all too rare in an age of corporate entertainment. I was on the job, and also chaperoning a teenager,

but I felt as if I'd snuck out of the house and broken curfew.

By any serious critical standard, *Paranormal Activity* is not a very good movie. It looks and sounds terrible. Its plot is thin and perforated with illogic. The acting occasionally rises to the level of adequacy. But it does have an ingenious, if not terribly original, formal conceit — that everything on-screen is real-life amateur video — that is executed with enough skill to make you jump and shriek. There is no lingering dread. You are not likely to be troubled by the significance of this ghost story or tantalized by its mysteries. It's more like a trip to the local haunted house, where even the fake blood and the tape-loop of howling wind you have encountered 100 times before can momentarily freak you out.

The film starts abruptly and never leaves the nondescript house in San Diego where a young couple is dealing with an unusual problem. It seems that Katie (Katie Featherston) has been troubled by intimations of a supernatural presence, which her boyfriend, Micah (Micah Sloat), has decided to capture on video. He rigs up a camera in their bedroom, which

## Film Notes

## PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

DIRECTED BY:  
OREN PELI

## STARRING:

KATIE FEATHERSTON (KATIE), MICAH SLOAT (MICAH), MARK FREDRICH (PSYCHIC), AMBER ARMSTRONG (AMBER), ASHLEY PALMER (GIRL ON INTERNET)

RUNNING TIME:  
1 HOUR 39 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

starts to pick up things that go bump in the night.

During the day, he and Katie argue about what to do, and their quarrels occasioned some interesting relationship advice from members of the audience. Half expressed the strong conviction that Micah should get as far away from that crazy shrew as possible, while the other half thought she should throw that idiot and his

camera out of the house. Instead of seeing a couples therapist, they briefly consult a psychic (Mark Fredrichs), who can't really help other than to provide the movie with a flimsy pretext for keeping poor Katie and Micah at home.

Further plot summary is beside the point. Weird stuff continues to happen, and Peli shows a measure of ingenuity in producing scares out of the simplest imaginable effects. You see no monsters, very little blood and nothing you don't anticipate, and yet it all has some impact. A number of horror movies, from *Blair Witch* to *Diary of the Dead* to *Cloverfield*, have used make-believe amateur footage, but *Paranormal Activity* does so in a way that is rigorously sloppy, almost convincing you that this is a poor doofus's record of his girlfriend's harassment by a demon.

But the suspension of disbelief ultimately depends on the late-night crowd. In a sparsely attended theater, or at home on DVD, the creakiness of the film would be much more glaring, and its lack of subtlety and visual polish would mute its modest, fleeting pleasures. It works best when it comes out of nowhere, because that's, in the end, where it goes.