

Russell Crowe stars in *Robin Hood*, directed by Ridley Scott.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UP

No men in tights

Ridley Scott puts his very individual stamp on the legend of Robin Hood

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

The story of Robin Hood first made its appearance on the silver screen in 1922 with Douglas Fairbanks in the title role. There have been many versions since, but it is safe to say that Ridley Scott has put a very individual stamp on the story. He has decided that he will not tell the legend that we all know, but instead focus on the story that preceded the legend. He wants to tell us how Robin Hood ended up in Sherwood Forest.

There have been some less than glittering attempts to put a new gloss on the Robin Hood story, and one might have thought that Kevin Costner's gloomy and brooding *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) and Mel Brooks' laboriously unfunny *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993) might have been the last we would see of this particular hero. But Scott has found a political dimension to the Robin Hood story that goes beyond

just taking from the rich and giving to the poor, and this is what drives this new production.

Having been brought up on the Robin Hood legend with the image of Errol Flynn in the title role, Russell Crowe seemed to me a highly improbable Robin Hood, and judging by the trailer, this was going to be something like *Gladiator*, except in Merry England. It is both more and less than that, because Scott has decided to take a stab at explaining, in simplified cinematic terms, something of the blurred division between Norman England and France, as well as some of the ideas floating around that in England led to the Magna Carta. It is a complicated job, and it takes every ounce of Scott's very considerable filmmaking talent to package it all up. With its large slabs of action and a romantic involvement, it's an ungainly package, but it holds together after a fashion.

Film Notes

ROBIN HOOD

DIRECTED BY:
RIDLEY SCOTT

STARRING:
RUSSELL CROWE (ROBIN LONGSTRIDE), CATE BLANCHETT (MARION LOXLEY), MAX VON SYDOW (SIR WALTER LOXLEY), WILLIAM HURT (WILLIAM MARSHAL), MARK STRONG (GODFREY)

RUNNING TIME:
140 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

The story starts out with Robin Longstride (Russell Crowe) as an archer in the army of Richard the Lion Heart, which is ravaging its

way through France. In a minor engagement, Richard is killed, and Longstride and a bunch of friends return to England. For various complex reasons, Robin is adopted into the family of Sir Walter Loxley, and is presented to all around as Loxley's son returned from 10 years of war. There is a *The Return of Martin Guerre* plot element here, which cleverly deals with the many personas of the Robin Hood legend, and sets up the most powerful relationship of the movie, that between Longstride, Loxley (Max von Sydow) and Marion (Cate Blanchett). Von Sydow and Blanchett provide a depth that Crowe's rough-and-ready action hero can play off, acquiring detail and shading without having to drop his tough guy carapace.

Scott is a master of making big exciting cinema, and there are plenty of exciting action sequences. An opening set piece of King Richard laying siege to a minor French castle is particularly well

done, conveying the organized chaos of medieval warfare. Unfortunately, the demands of romantic storytelling get the better of Scott, and the final battle to repel a French invasion is woefully unconvincing.

The supporting cast is generally excellent, but the demands of Scott's historical agenda get in the way of character development, and Mark Strong, who plays Godfrey, a noble who shifts allegiance between France and England, is, through no fault of his own, an utterly one-dimensional villain.

In its style, *Robin Hood* owes too much to both *Gladiator* and Scott's 2005 Crusader film, *Kingdom of Heaven*. It doesn't feel fresh, and despite all that is good about it, remains unengaging. Scott has recently confirmed that he will soon be embarking on two 3D *Alien* prequels. Is *Robin Hood* just a first step toward cannibalizing his body of work in a desperate attempt to keep the films coming? Let's hope not.

A bullet in his head

Jean-Pierre Jeunet is up to his usual tricks with *Micmacs*, in which one man takes on the arms industry

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Micmacs a Tire-Larigot is the latest offering from director Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the purveyor of such delights as *Amélie* (*Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*), and is likely to be a great favorite with local audiences for its mixture of the cult of cute with a Gallic whimsy. But ever since the huge excitement that greeted the release of the dark comedy *Delicatessen* in 1991, Jeunet has been plowing the same furrow, and the crop is becoming decidedly anemic.

This is not to say that *Micmacs* is a bad film, and in tackling the subject of the Western arms industry selling weapons to third world terrorists, Jeunet is breaking new ground, expanding his range from bourgeois fantasy into the realm of contemporary issues and world politics. But the characters of Jeunet's imagination seem all too familiar, and *Micmacs* features much the same bunch of social misfits and weirdos that inhabited *Delicatessen* and to a lesser extent his 1995 film *The City of Lost Children*. Let us also not forget Jeunet's disastrous efforts to crowbar such characters into the *Aliens* franchise with *Aliens: Resurrection* (2007).

Micmacs leaps out from the starting block with a roller-coaster ride of twists and turns that introduces us to Bazil (Dany Boon), a video rental store attendant who is accidentally shot when he witnesses a drive-by shooting. In the background, Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* is playing, and the introductory credits are given in the style of old black-and-white movies. The mood is playful, cinematically savvy, and full of energy, providing a considerable amount of backstory in just a few images and virtually no words.

This has always been Jeunet's strength, and in *Micmacs* dialogue is secondary to the moving image. You are being spoken to in pictures, and the acting style complements this with its theatrical boldness that borders on the exaggerated movement of mime. The deftness of the opening 15 minutes is inspiring, but then the weight of more conventional storytelling begins to drag it down. *Micmacs* has energy enough to keep going, but the initial effervescent airiness is lost.

The story revolves around two rival arms companies, one whose land mines are responsible for the death of Bazil's father and the latter for the bullet that is lodged inside his skull. Out of work and out of hope after recovering from being shot, Bazil meets up with a bunch of people living in a rubbish tip at the edge of the city. It is the sort of junkyard that furnishes its inhabitants with an endless supply of materials that they can recycle into objects for use and amusement. It does not smell, it does not harbor disease. It is in fact quite the coziest rubbish tip you are likely to find even in the magical realms of cinema.

Living off the detritus of society, these misfits, who include a contortionist and a former human cannonball, come together to help Bazil in his quest to take revenge on the arms dealers. They draw on a wide range of skills and items fashioned from their rubbish tip. This manages to include some state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, all stylishly distressed and very retro-chic.

There are some delightfully amusing ploys, and a scene in which the arms dealers are brought face to face with their greed and inhumanity, which shifts from tub-thumping moralizing to farce in the blink of an eye, is a masterful piece of legerdemain.

Alas, for all its style and verve, the characters of *Micmacs* never quite come alive. Everything is just a little too carefully put in place, and the darkly anarchic forces that energized the director's early work have been sanitized and trivialized. One gets the feeling of yet another creative force being set adrift and watered down as it flows into the mainstream.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW



District 13 — Ultimatum (Banlieue 13 — Ultimatum)

Luc Besson gives us plenty of style and some good action sequences held together in what might generously be called a plot that is about nefarious dealings in the French government put right by an alliance of street gangs under the guidance of super cop Damien Tomaso (Cyril Raffaelli). Don't expect it to make too much sense. All the racial stereotypes also come out of the woodwork, with Arian Nation, Asian, Latino, black and Islamic crime syndicates all sporting ethnic/punk fashions. It's pretty good humored, and Tomaso and sidekick Leito (David Belle) have some seriously appealing moves. The pace is frenetic and at 101 minutes, it's over before you start asking yourself too many questions.



The Back-up Plan

Originally scheduled to open last week, this Jennifer Lopez vehicle about a single woman who finalizes her artificial insemination plans on the same day as she meets the man of her dreams — in this case Australian hunk Alex O'Loughlin — seems off-puttingly gynecological, and is only made worse by a script and acting that has made-for-TV written all over it. Some good supporting performances, but no chemistry in the lead roles.



The Maid (La Nana)

A Chilean film about the lot of a domestic helper, this low-key work has impressed critics. In addition to a slew of Latin American awards, it also picked up the Grand Jury Prize in the World Cinema category for director Sebastian Silva and Special Jury Prize for lead actress Catalina Saavedra at the Sundance Film Festival last year. The story of a maid who has been with the same family for 23 years, facing rivalry from a new, younger home helper looks deeply into the tensions of an intimate and yet unequal relationship. Violence simmers beneath the surface and little household secrets make life uncomfortable for all.



A Nightmare on Elm Street

If you haven't had enough of Freddy Krueger, then here is yet another dose. It is 25 years and a million miles from the original Wes Craven feature, and the primal fear once inspired by Krueger has now become the stuff of pop culture. Directed by Samuel Bayer and produced by Michael Bay, the volume is turned up on all the familiar riffs from the previous *Nightmare* movies, but really it's just more of the same. The addition of CGI effects in this latest version is generally agreed to be less than successful, and while the rest of the movie is perfectly competent, Freddy Krueger is no match for the weight of history.



Romantic Women Film Festival (善變女人心影展)

A film festival organized by the art house Wonderful Theater (真善美戲院, formerly The Majestic) brings together a gaggle of recent art house releases under a single banner, all relating to love, however tenuously. Films include *Breakfast on Pluto*, *A French Gigolo*, *Facing Window*, *Black Ice*, *Irina Palm*, *The Valet*, *The Unknown Woman*, *Rabbit Without Ears*, and *Whatever Lola Wants*. The festival runs until May 28. Books of four tickets are available for NT\$600, and eight tickets for NT\$1,080. For more information about screening times, visit the festival Web site at www.movie.com.tw/wonderful.



Welcome

This French film with dialogue in French, English and Kurdish, *Welcome* has had a successful run on the European festival circuit. A drama dealing with love amid the chaos of the largely Middle Eastern refugee camps around Calais, *Welcome* tells the story of Kurdish boy Bilal, who, after a massive trek across Europe, faces the final hurdle of reaching England. He decides to swim the Channel, and gets help from swimming instructor Simon, who is in the throes of a divorce. A strong script and acting, along with sensitive handling by director Philippe Lioret, make a topical issue come to life.

Film Notes

MICMACS (MICMACS A TIRE-LARIGOT)

DIRECTED BY:
JEAN-PIERRE JEUNET

STARRING:
DANY BOON (BAZIL), ANDRE DUSSOLLIER (NICOLAS THIBAUT DE FENOUILLET), NICOLAS MARIE (FRANCOIS MARCONI), JEAN-PIERRE MARIELLE (PLACARD), YOLANDE MOREAU (TAMBOUILLE), JULIE FERRIER (LA MOME CAOUTCHOU)

RUNNING TIME:
105 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
FRENCH WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY