

CRITICS' CHOICE



CINEMA
NIGEL
ANDREWS

Shortbus ★★★

Or the short way to shorten Aunt Edna's life expectancy. Hardcore sex, mostly gay, reaches the public screen in John Cameron Mitchell's lively, good-hearted if overrated (at Cannes) tale of life in the Noughties. Boy meets girl, boy meets boy, girl meets girl. The swirling collage of kiss and make out attempts to comment on society and its mores, but it really just wants to have a good time and encourage us to do the same.

Jackass Number Two ★★★

Just like number one, it will shock, offend, nauseate and scandalise – so please form an orderly queue. After topping the US film chart, Johnny Knoxville and crew treat Britain to the same S&M set pieces: snake wrestling, buttock branding, dung eating... It's not for the squeamish. But if you can keep your breakfast while all around are losing theirs, it's hard to resist the energy.

Flushed Away ★★★

After *Wallace & Gromit in the Curse of the Were-Rabbit* – the last cry for big-screen Plasticine? – Aardman/DreamWorks go digital. Nick Park's name is suspiciously absent from the credits as the CGI mice run amok in the London sewers, boating, frolicking, romancing and

fighting the evil Toad and his henchrats. More frenzied than funny, with symptoms of runaway Americanisation in a plot crossing *Home Alone* with *The African Queen*.

Stranger Than Fiction ★★

Just when you thought postmodernism had been pulled from overlong screen service, this laggard whimsy tootles its horn. Uptight bachelor Will Ferrell keeps hearing a narrator's voice (Emma Thompson), and fears he is becoming part of a novel. Every other character here is certainly paper-thin, from Dustin Hoffman's literature guru to Maggie Gyllenhaal's love-sparking baker. Ferrell alone brings the arch antics a little beyond-the-call humanity.

Pan's Labyrinth ★★★

Guillermo del Toro spirits us back to the Spanish civil war for a fantasy/reality mix about a little girl, stepdaughter of a fascist, who meets a cloven-footed creature in an old ruin. Can the satyr influence history? Help the girl? Save Spain? Trying for magical realism, Del Toro mostly succeeds, though sometimes there's an uneasy blend of war and winsomeness, verismo and escapism.

All on general release unless specified.



THEATRE
ALASTAIR
MACAULAY

Dick Whittington NEW

Mark Ravenhill is becoming our most prolific playwright. Here he gives his (and the Barbican's) first Christmas pantomime. It's standard for writers to stuff *Dick Whittington* with references to London politics. Can we predict a reference to Mayor Ken? Edward Hall directs. *Barbican, London EC2, 0845 120 7550, to January 20 2007.*

Don Juan in Soho NEW

Patrick Marber was the best British playwright to emerge in the late 1990s. A thrillingly "now" writer who was also classical, he seemed the clearest heir to Pinter, Mamet and Stoppard. Now he's in movies, and it's a sorrow to me that he's no longer a frequent factor in London theatre. But here is his adaptation of Molière's version of the Don Juan legend. *Donmar Warehouse, London WC1, 020 7240 4882, to February 10 2007.*

Waves ★★★★★

This is a sensuously many-layered response to Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves*, by director Katie Mitchell and her company of actors and musicians. An absorbingly multimedia performance work, it pours forth meanings as an analysis of consciousness and a work of art. Character itself seems to coalesce like coral, and even to disintegrate like it, with the inner voice and the outer face separated and reassembled before our eyes and ears. *Cottesloe, National Theatre, London SE1, 020 7452 3000, to February 8 2007.*

Amy's View ★★★★★

Although nothing about Peter Hall's new staging matches the original 1997 National Theatre production of David Hare's play, the drama itself becomes only more absorbing. Hall focuses and paces the great mother-daughter scenes so that one feels how subtly political they are in their coverage of core human material. *Garrick Theatre, London WC2, 0870 890 1104, to March 17 2007.*



DANCE
CLEMENT
CRISP

The Nutcracker NEW

"New", of course, only in the matter of starting a run of performances since, as every ballet-goer, every parent, every child and every dance critic agonisingly knows, Christmas means Tchaikovsky, snowflakes, a party, and lots of smiling as *The Nutcracker* returns like the ghost of Jacob Marley. English National Ballet takes up residence at the London Coliseum on Friday with its flakey version (designed by Gerald Scarfe) of this still beautiful (in the right hands and feet and staging) ballet. *Coliseum, London WC2, 0870 145 0200, to December 24.*

The Nutcracker ★★★★★

One of the best of *Nutcrackers* is Peter Wright's staging for the Birmingham Royal Ballet. It treats the tale with respect and affection, fills the stage with the proper Christmas magic, honours the glorious Tchaikovsky score, and invites children and grown-ups alike to believe in the story (which shifts between gentlest fantasy and something at moments more sombre) and to delight in its happiest of happy conclusions. Even the most determined of balletophobes among the tots might well succumb to its charms. *Hippodrome, Birmingham, 0870 730 1234, to December 13.*

The Sleeping Beauty ★★★★★

During the coming week the Royal Ballet plays its sort-of revival of the Ninette de Valois production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, which looks a bit too sugary and too winsome to convince me that it is quite the masterpiece I grew up with. But there is a lot of fascination in the casts. On Monday Lauren Cuthbertson and David Makhateli lead the performance; on Tuesday the irresistible Alina Cojocaru and Federico Bonelli are starrily there; on Thursday evening the fascinating pairing of Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta is on view. *Royal Opera House, London WC2, 020 7304 4000, to December 20.*

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Magic: Birmingham Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker*

CDS & DVDS

Beethoven: Piano Sonatas

Paul Lewis
Harmonia Mundi (3 CDs)
The one drawback about Lewis's Beethoven is that it is so temperate – the price of musical fashion. But let's not be too fussy. Played as elegantly as this, Beethoven's classical eloquence shines brighter than ever: it's only with hindsight that we have painted him into a dark Romantic corner. Lewis's way with these 10 sonatas – ranging from the youthful "Pathétique" to the "Waldstein" and "Hammerklavier" – is more poetic than dramatic or introspective, painting Beethoven very much as a man of his time.
Andrew Clark

SENEGAL

Ismael Lo
Wrasse
Ismael Lo has been saddled with the tag of being the "Bob Dylan of Senegal". On his new album, the harmonica is indeed on display on a couple of tracks, and the songs have a populist political edge, covering ferryboat disasters, arranged marriages, African peasants and (a speciality of African music that does not feature elsewhere) a plea for the young to respect their elders. The musical background ranges from the slow ballad "Baykat", with its thumping double downbeat, to the string arrangements on "Incha Allah" and "Tajabone" to the full-on mbalax rush of "Ouvriers" and "Jiguen".
David Honigmann

The Sweet Escape

Gwen Stefani
Polydor
For this her second album, the follow-up to 2004's quadruple-platinum *Love Angel Music Baby*, Gwen Stefani is joined by an eclectic bunch of co-songwriters. The most ear-catching songs involve R&B super-producers The Neptunes, who frame Stefani's girlish vocals with bold, modern beats and eccentric flourishes such as yodelling and *Sound of Music* samples. Tim Rice-Oxley of Keane chips in with a charming ballad and ex-No Doubt band mate Tony Kanal contributes a pair of dire pop tracks. These troughs notwithstanding, it's an impressive album, though Stefani doesn't stamp her personality on her material in quite the same way that Madonna does.
Ludovic Hunter-Tilney

Army in the Shadows

Dir: Jean-Pierre Melville, 1969, *BFI*
A newly restored print of Melville's fine French Resistance drama. Based on Joseph Kessel's novel of the same title, the tense atmosphere is superbly realised, the pace controlled, the sets menacing and claustrophobic. And, in the middle of it all, relationships flourish and flounder under the weight of suspicion and loss. One of the best wartime films to come out of France, and superbly packaged with extras and an excellent essay.
Peter Aspden

★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★ Good ★★★ Fair ★★ Disappointing ★ Never again



ART
JACKIE
WULLSCHLAGER



MUSIC
ANDREW
CLARK

David Smith, *Personage* ★★★★★ LAST CHANCE

A superb complement to Tate's current Smith retrospective, this dramatic show of his vertical figures, which seem to soar across the towering bright spaces here with optimistic force and élan, confirm Smith as a figurative master as well as an abstract expressionist leader and a pointer to minimalism.
Gagosian Gallery, London WC1, 020 7841 9960, to December 9.

Francis Bacon in the 1950s ★★★★★ LAST CHANCE

Stunning show exploring Bacon's 1950s works whose rawness and urgency, this exhibition contends, make this his most exciting period.
Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich, 01603 593199, to December 10.

Margaret Hunter, *Bunch of Person* ★★★

The best work yet from this interesting, individualist sculptor of the female form: eight life-size figures carved from beech, lime, yew and chestnut. Hunter's influences range from African primitivism to German expressionism, especially Macke (Hunter lives in Berlin, and studied with Baselitz), but her ability to suggest movement and elasticity yet still concentration, mask-like grandeur yet a modern portrait, assertive strength yet vulnerability are all her own. *Art First, London W1, 020 7734 0386, to December 22.*

Mauro Perruchetti, *Blast* ★★★

Jelly Babies morph into Buddhas, scent bottles into hand grenades, while 24-carat gold-plated chrome "totems to warmongering" could be giant lipsticks. Perruchetti's bright transparent resin infuses everything with a hallucinatory glow in this witty take on post-pop and minimalism: exuberant, clever, classic Italian elegance underlined by serious political and social critique. *Beaux Arts, London W1, 020 7437 5799, to December 16.*

Mozart's Requiem ★★★★★

December 5, the composer's death-day, seems an appropriate moment to bring the Mozart year to a climax, and so the spotlight falls on the piece he was working on when he died. But whose Requiem is it? The autograph score contains barely 25 per cent of the music Mozart intended to compose; what we usually hear is a completion by his pupil Franz Xaver Süssmayr. Three performances on Tuesday illustrate the challenges posed by Mozart's unfinished testament. Under Matthias Bamert, the London Mozart Players and Tallis Chamber Choir will confine themselves to performable music in the autograph score, breaking off dramatically after eight bars of the *Lacrymosa*. In Canterbury Nicholas Cleobury leads a postmodern version of the Requiem, with commentary pieces created for the occasion by Dominic Muldowney and seven other composers. In Manchester Gianandrea Noseda conducts the BBC Philharmonic in one of the many modern versions that aims to improve on Süssmayr. *St John's, Smith Square, London SW1, 020 7222 1061; The Cathedral, Canterbury, 01227 378 188; Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, 0161 907 9000, Tuesday.*

Carmen NEW

Anna Caterina Antonacci sings the title role in the Royal Opera's new production of Bizet, staged by Francesca Zambello and conducted by Antonio Pappano. Don't be surprised if the tenor, Jonas Kaufmann, steals the show. *Royal Opera House, London WC2, 020 7304 4000, Friday.*

Sinfonietta ONE NIGHT ONLY

Oliver Knussen conducts the London Sinfonietta in music by Henze, Stockhausen and Kagel that each has reshaped from an earlier work, taking into account new ideas and techniques. *Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1, 08703 800400, Wednesday.*