

Reviewer questions Oscar winner's allure

BY FRANKLIN CLINE
Reviewer

I'm genuinely perplexed by the overwhelming critical and commercial success of "Slumdog Millionaire," the rags-to-rajah story of a young Indian boy. The film assumes two strange albeit plausible (unlike its plot) characteristics about its audience: that they are willing to disregard the great majority of their sense of what can be fiction but still assume the guise of fate (I'm talking about something deeper than "suspension of disbelief") and, perhaps even worse, that they will view the film through the condescending, colonial eye of removed Western viewers who get to have it both ways inasmuch as they get to look upon the poor boy in two ways: with a chance to not only become rich but get the girl (has the Indian dream been colonized by the American

dream?) and also to somehow feel as though they have contributed to this wonderful story simply by being complacent to exist within our phenomenal Western culture.

What I'm trying to say here is, how much of this film unequivocally is Indian and how much of it simply is our idealized (a pretty word for an ugly thing I know, but bear with me) version of how those poverty-stricken Indians live? Is it simply a mirror, or has it, like "Gandhi," which also was a hugely popular film written and directed by Brits who co-opted genuinely Indian legends and stories for their own "aw shucks, we care too!" benefit, unapologetically sucked the life-blood out of another culture in favor of

subtle promotion of its own?

Howard Canard, highly respected art critic and 2009's "It Boy," who runs a well-respected blog, gentlemenprivilege.blogspot.com, made an interesting criticism of the film, calling it "an Indian version of the David Spade film 'Joe Dirt.'" Although I don't necessarily agree with that sentiment in its totality, I agree there is a plastic way in which poverty is presented in each film, something which is fairly easily conquered through nefarious means or through a mixture of classic fool's guile and love, depending on the character's antagonist or protagonist status within the film's specific morality. Therein lies another issue I

have with "Slumdog" — its lack of any real conflict, despite its many scenes of physical and mental torture and its overt attempt at creating a sort of "man versus society" setup. Of course, because humans make their own society, something which the film fails to point out, that vague statement falls flat.

So I hate the film because it's simple, because it takes the seriously evil business of colonization far too lightly (lest we forget, Indian schoolchildren are not reading Alexander Dumas because he's their hometown hero, so to speak), because the end of the film makes a mockery of Bollywood films and the genre of cinema in general, because it is at heart a stupidly conflated love story in which fate or God Rama or whatever intervenes and everything falls into place just like that apple hitting Newton's head dead center and because it gives poverty glamorous sheen that perhaps is even uglier than

the conditions of the society that has allowed it to happen in the first place. I also hate the film because, like all of director Danny Boyle's films, it's made with a transparent faux-intensity that owes more to Viagra than any natural stimulation.

I know "Slumdog" has been the recipient of a lot of hype and near-universal praise, but honestly I can't figure out why. It's a one-trick pony that brings absolutely nothing new to the table, especially not in its crass and primitive commentary on fate, whatever that might be.

The best the film offers is that fate is something that is out there, but it's working somewhat arbitrarily and only for the good guys. Come on, Boyle — even Odysseus and Gilgamesh had to fight their own battles. Compared to those guys, your protagonist is nothing more than blindly lucky.

Author addresses U.S. patriotism

BY JOHN HITZEL
Reviewer

I found a gem in Pickler Memorial Library, and it frightened me. Naomi Wolf's "The End of America: A Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot" is terrifying because it is not fiction. I had an idea of how far modern America has fallen from its position as the shining example of democracy we have been taught to believe from an early age, but I didn't think we were as far from our pedestal as Wolf demonstrates. But there's hope — we haven't hit the bottom yet.

Compared to Ron Paul's "Revolution," Wolf's call to action is desperate and startlingly immediate. Paul writes mostly about economics and political issues, whereas Wolf writes about the death of the real spirit of our country: liberty.

Wolf argues that America is undergoing a "fascist shift" and that these sorts of things can look non-threatening and occur while most things appear normal.

Wolf writes that she was inspired to write the book when a Holocaust survivor friend of hers pointed out similarities between the actions of the Nazis and certain policies enacted under former president George W. Bush. Wolf said she thought her friend was exaggerating at first but was alarmed once she did research and then felt compelled to write her book.

Recall that Germany and Italy were functioning democracies before they were overrun by dictators, who studied each other and initially rose to power legally. Hitler studied Mussolini and Stalin, Stalin studied them both and Communist China studied Communist Russia. The School of the Americas, renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in 2001, studies them all.

"The price of freedom is eternal vigilance," quotes Wolf, citing the Federalist Papers, adding, "and we have not been vigilant."

Most Americans are too tired after a day's work to care about this stuff. For a democracy that is supposed to be an example to the rest of the world — especially having just put one into place in Iraq — we aren't looking so good. Our voter turnout rates are embarrassing. Sitcoms, a large chunk of the dominant socializing force that is television, portray characters as apathetic toward public policy and too involved in petty, insignificant things to have the energy or patience for the exercise in frustration that is American politics. Political debate, according to most news shows, involves yelling without saying much, makes spectacles

out of distractions and often sounds like an indecipherable foreign language. Dare I say this book only is political in the sense that it deals with relationships of power within a society and the consequences of non-vigilance, and there is no yelling. Wolf's language, thankfully, is plain and easy to understand.

Wolf outlines 10 steps that all dictators enact when they attempt to close down a democracy: invoke an internal and external threat (i.e. terrorism), create a system of secret prisons (Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib), develop a thug caste or paramilitary force (WTO, Blackwater mercenaries), surveil ordinary citizens (NSA's warrantless wiretapping), harass citizens' groups (infiltrators turning peaceful protests violent, FBI infiltrating peace organizations), arbitrarily detain and release citizens (Terrorist Watch List, airline security checks and "random" interrogations), target key individuals and public figures (U.S. Attorney firings, denouncing the Dixie Chicks for speaking out against the war, calling the ACLU a terrorist organization), restrict the press (look around), cast dissent as treason and criticism as espionage (vague definition of enemy combatant, Military Commissions Act) and finally subvert the rule of law.

The point of all this is to intimidate the public into voluntarily giving up their rights and civil liberties, making them easier to rule while to make it more difficult for ideas contrary to the ruling party's interests to surface and to threaten their established order. Fear is a powerful motivator as well as a great silencer.

I viewed a number of Fox News interviews with Wolf via YouTube. They are funny if you are one of those people who likes to laugh at Fox News. They shut her down, wouldn't let her defend or even articulate her points and told her that her deeply researched, non-fiction book was "way off base" and "out there." Thanks, Fox News. We know your game. It makes me laugh when they let themselves be that transparent, despite all the patriotic color schemes. Wolf spoke with clarity and poise, and she knew her material front and back. For those who are concerned but don't read for leisure, there are some 40-minute videos of real journalists interviewing Wolf on YouTube.

Patriots don't need to wear flag pins or know how to sing "America the Beautiful." Patriots don't have to wake up, salute the flag they have hanging in their bedrooms and say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Patriots aren't required to stand behind the President on every issue, make cracks about "real Americans" and fake



Photo courtesy of www.randomhouse.com

Author Naomi Wolf released her newest work, "The End of America: A Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot." The book was inspired by a friend who connected similarities between the actions of the Nazis and specific policies written under George W. Bush.

Americans or blow up firecrackers for a month before and after July Fourth. Patriots don't even have to buy American cars, only trade in American stocks, put flag stickers on their SUVs or adamantly argue about creationism versus Darwinism in public schools. Patriots recognize when the things they love about their country are at risk of disappearing, and then Patriots work hard to defend those qualities.

"The End of America" is slim at 165 pages but thick with alarm, rife with urgency and bursting with warning. Wolf

writes things that nobody wants to hear, but she writes them anyway because that's what America is all about — the freedom to do what you think is right and to say what you know is true, even if others disagree or don't want to listen. America also believes in the potential for an informed public debate, fueled by the press, to act as an additional check upon government. Wolf has done the research to inform concerned citizens about the direction of America's near future, and her conclusions leave all Americans in a less comfortable place, hopefully to everyone's benefit.

Ben Kweller goes country

BY HARRY BURSON
Reviewer

Imagine, if you will, a stereotypical music lover of our post-MTV/blog-loving generation. He or she loves all sorts of music, regardless of genre or time period, from art rock to hip-hop to funk. Just think about how exciting it would be to hear a disc featuring cameos from David Byrne, Tom Waits, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Kanye West, M.I.A., members of the Wu-Tang Clan, George Clinton, Chuck D and many others.

If such a list makes you salivate, you're in luck — the CD exists. "Spirit of Apollo" is the debut disc from N.A.S.A. (short for North America/South America), a DJ collective made up of Squeak E. Clean, from the U.S., and DJ Zegon, from Brazil.

The DJs are relatively unknown, besides their work in advertising — you might remember Squeak E. Clean from that Adidas ad with Karen O a few years ago. They produced "Spirit of Apollo" to foster unity between the two Western continents, featuring music heavily based in Brazilian funk.

How the DJs wrangled the impressive guest list is a mystery to me, but the promise of hearing Byrne and Chuck D on the same track is an interesting juxtaposition that's impossible to pass up hearing at least once.

Unfortunately for this disc, once is all you need. While the beats supposedly are based in Brazilian music, the samples mostly are bland, sounding like uninspired outtakes from a Native Tongues album. Likewise, none of the contributors seem particularly enthused about the project, leaving the tracks busy with guest spots that are bland at best — not to mention Waits' nearly unlistenable self-parody on the track "Spacious Thoughts."

Nothing particular is wrong with this album, beyond the fact that the audience is left with the empty feeling of a wasted opportunity. It's not nearly as fun to listen to as it is to think about.

On Ben Kweller's fourth album, "Changing Horses," the singer/songwriter abandons the indie pop that has been his bread and butter for the last several years in favor of a relatively straight-ahead country approach.

Kweller is no stranger to change, abandoning his grunge roots with the band Radish in favor of the more personal approach of his solo debut, "Sha Sha." Unfortunately, he never delivered on the promise of his first album, turning in two more discs with few hooks and progressively weaker songwriting.

Going country really is a great idea for Kweller, giving him better direction in his songwriting that he clearly didn't have on earlier discs. Also, despite what

the old-timey cover art conveys, Kweller doesn't ham it up too much. He forgoes an adopted twang in favor of the familiar voice his fans have come to know and love.

The album is stripped down and sounds as if it was recorded live, with only a few string and vocal overdubs. The reference points clearly are Gram Parsons and spare alt-country in the style of Gillian Welch.

Besides the trucker song misstep of "Fight," the material generally is in the usual singer/songwriter vein that you've come to expect from Kweller — some story-songs ("On Her Own") and some direct confessionals ("Things I Like to Do," "Old Hat").

This album surprisingly is authentic and enjoyable. If he sticks with it, he can make a few more good ones in this vein. Keep on trucking, Kweller.

Finally in the roundup, we have the newest EP from indie-rockers Abe Vigoda. I first heard of Abe Vigoda this summer when they were opening for the like-minded noise-rockers No Age. At first, I thought No Age literally was touring with the elderly actor Abe Vigoda and was fairly disap-



Photo courtesy of www.benkweller.com

Singer/songwriter Ben Kweller changes his indie pop sound for country music.

pointed when I learned the band simply had co-opted his name.

The band has received attention for touring with No Age and experienced positive notices for the 2008 album "Skeleton." Its latest EP, "Reviver," follows in that vein with a familiar post-punk sound that has been in vogue for the last few years in the indie rock world.

The band sounds like Joy Division or maybe Gang of Four, which is not necessarily a bad thing, except neither the angu-

lar guitars or atonal vocals ever approach anything resembling a hook. The songs on "Reviver" sort of just blend together so that you're surprised when the 20 minutes or so are up.

The band is interesting at its noisiest on tracks like "Endless Sleeper," and gets bogged down in the repetitive murk of the five-minute-plus "Wild Heart."

If you really like No Age, you sort of might dig this, but I doubt this band will get more interesting.