

Underrated films deserve attention

BY KEN DUSOLD
Reviewer

During the last eight months, a slew of good films has been released.

Some have garnered critical acclaim and large profits at the box office, such as "Inglourious Basterds," "Avatar" and "Sherlock Holmes."

Others, although excellent and deserving of all the accolades they received, went unviewed by large numbers of people.

Three months of summer relaxation ahead for students and vacation time planned for working adults provides the opportunity to catch up on some must-see movies from the past year you might have missed. My top five underrated films released this school year are as follows:

1. "An Education:" This British film from Danish-born director Lone Scherfig has turned Carey Mulligan into one of the most popular young actresses in Hollywood and earned her what could be the first of several Academy Award nominations. However, the film itself received little praise compared to other Oscar-nominated pictures. The story of 16-year-old Jenny in 1960s London, forced to make the difficult decision between a possible love and her academic career, was beautifully filmed with dedicated performances from supporting players such as Alfred Molina, Jenny's distraught father, who displayed what might be the best acting of his career.

The musical score, which went completely ignored during awards season, might be one of the best of the last few years.

2. "Pirate Radio:" Perhaps the most underrated film of 2009, "Pirate Radio" definitely was one of the most enjoyable. Based on Radio Caroline, a famous floating radio station during the 1960s when rock music was banned in the United Kingdom, "Pirate Radio" for tells a story about a group of societal rebels and their fight against British government. Star-



Carey Mulligan was nominated for a Best Actress Oscar for her role as a teenage girl faced with a difficult decision in "An Education."

ring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Bill Nighy and a great assortment of some of the best music from rock's golden age, this movie is a rowdy, good time.

3. "Invictus:" Clint Eastwood's biopic of Nelson Mandela and his determination to unite South Africa in the 1990s through a ragtag team of so-so rugby players presented audiences with the much-needed story of one of the 20th century's most inspiring individuals immediately following his rise to power. Morgan Freeman's performance will stand out as one of the best acting achievements long after both the former African leader and the Oscar winner are gone. Anyone looking for a feel-good movie about triumph in the face of monumental obstacles should consider this terrific option.

4. "Paranormal Activity:" Few films with a budget as low as this psychological fright-fest have caused such a huge reaction. The film follows a young couple that has just moved into a home in San Diego and captures the supernatural happenings of their creepy dwelling when the lights are off. Spine-chilling scenes, like when an invisible source moves an Ouija board piece or when the main female character is standing above her boyfriend while he sleeps, are not for the faint of heart. If supernatural thrillers in which

the scariest moments come from your imagination easily frighten you, "Paranormal Activity" is not a smart option. However, for the braver among us, this film serves up the best kind of horror.

5. "Fantastic Mr. Fox:" 20th Century Fox's addition to the world of animation was eclipsed only by Pixar's "Up" in 2009. The film, based on a story by Roald Dahl, follows Mr. Fox, his wife, son, nephew and animal neighbors as they take on three sibling farmers in a fight for food, home and life. The use of stop-motion animation, which has proven to be quite successful thanks to movies such as "The Nightmare Before Christmas" and the "Wallace and Gromit" series, works very well here, complementing the eccentricity of Dahl. With voice-work from George Clooney, Meryl Streep, Bill Murray and Michael Gambon. "Mr. Fox" is the best bet for a good alternative to Disney and Pixar.

Honorable mention: "The Last Station," "Me and Orson Welles" and "Up in the Air."

Keeping in mind these and other good films that were passed up by most moviegoers, there are plenty of choices available when you do not feel like shelling out \$9 at the cinema on a Friday night this summer. Having said that, have a fun, safe summer, and keep going to the movies.



"Pirate Radio" features rock music in a decade when it was banned.



"Invictus" tells the inspirational story of Nelson Mandela's struggles and triumphs with a rugby team.



Photos courtesy of rottentomatoes.com
"Fantastic Mr. Fox" presents big names George Clooney, Meryl Streep and others as voice-overs in an animated neighbor feud.



Photo courtesy of last.fm

Circa Survive lead vocalist Anthony Green's distinct voice is reminiscent of his earlier days with Saosin.

Circa Survive polishes sound



BY COREY BOMMEL
Reviewer

Circa Survive

After a successful sophomore album and subsequent move to a major label, Circa Survive diaphragms held their breath for the next inevitable release. They were not disappointed.

Experimental rock band Circa Survive chose to release their new album "Blue Sky Noise" under the Atlantic Records label following the end of their previous contract, making it their first release on a major label. This move did not impede any of the band's creative juices, and its sound evolved in a positive way.

Lead singer Anthony Green has come a long way from his early work with Saosin and Zolof the Rock and Roll Destroyer.

His high-pitched style is unique and instantly recognizable. He has honed it to a sharp, biting point on "Blue Sky Noise," and he still lets his roots show when he screams in the track "Get Out."

The guitar work of Colin Frangicetto and Brendan Ekstrom is complex and elaborate. They flit airily among the vocals but find time to break out and soar over the rest of the band. Their guitars weave in

and out of each other, splitting the spotlight. The bass lines provided by Nick Beard are biting and ruthless, and Steve Clifford's drumming accentuates each track perfectly.

The band's penchant for off-the-wall writing and experimental signatures was not altered by its new label. On "Blue Sky Noise," the band is just as willing as ever to take risks and shy away from the mainstream feel other bands lean toward. There are a couple safe songs thrown into the mix, but overall it is a typical Circa Survive album.

The songs follow Circa Survive's general experimental sound throughout the album. "Get Out" is the standout track on the album. Green lets loose and screams akin to his style in Saosin. The guitar work is excellent on this track — there are numerous breaks for solos and an extended solo at the end. The track is one of the heaviest on "Blue Sky Noise," yet it's still accessible to those who dislike that style of music. The pace slows down for several songs, including the dreamy ballad "Spirit of the Stairwell." The song's acoustic sound is accentuated with ambient noises from electric guitar.

"Blue Sky Noise" is a perfect blend of styles — fast and slow, hard and soft, experimental and familiar. This album is one of the top albums released thus far this year.

Ozomatli
Los Angeles locals Ozomatli are known for blending salsa, funk, hip-hop, soul and punk into a

body-moving beat with a political undercurrent.

"Fire Away" is Ozomatli's fifth full-length studio album. The band continues its multicultural musical journey, seeking to capture their live sound in a studio setting. Every song on "Fire Away" is centered around a bass line, vocal hook or blaring horn, exemplary of its live shows.

The band's former political-activist fervor takes a backseat for most of the album. The biggest political statement is on "Gay

Vatos in Love," in which the band focuses on the same-sex marriage debate in California. However, the song comes off as more of a joke than a political statement, although it doesn't present itself in an offensive manner.

Every song on the album represents a different style of music, showing off the band's versatility. The fastest song is "Malagasy Shock," a ska-punk barn-burner of a song. The vocals are a call-to-arms of sorts. Ozo stirs the crowd with, "Don't ever let 'em f**k you over/Grab a mic and we'll show you/Feel the spark light your eye/Move your feet or you will die." Jack Johnson also lends a hand on "It's Only Paper," an anti-materialistic rap-rock song.

The LA sound that fans have come to love shines through on "Fire Away," fading out with the salsa beat on "Caballito." Although not as politically charged as their earlier music, Ozomatli still creates a cohesive album that gets crowds bouncing.

"His high-pitched style is unique and instantly recognizable. He has honed it to a sharp, biting point."

'Conviction' mixes up gameplay



BY ALEX CARLSON
Reviewer

Tom Clancy, one of the mystery genre's best-known authors, has made a splash in the video game industry. "Splinter Cell," a series of tales about hard-edged Sam Fisher's work as a secret agent, is the best example of his expertise thus far. Four "Splinter Cell" games have been released during the course of nearly

a decade. The fifth installment, after much anticipation, has landed on store shelves. Sam Fisher isn't playing around anymore, and in "Splinter Cell: Conviction," the veteran spy is out to take back what was stolen from him.

"Conviction" follows long-time protagonist Sam Fisher, a gruff and jaded secret agent. Past games in the "Splinter Cell" series portrayed Sam Fisher as dutiful and noble, but "Conviction" deepens his character.

Sam's daughter, thought to be dead, is discovered to be alive and kidnapped. Once again, Sam must reenter the battlefield, this time searching for whoever is holding his daughter captive. Sam's character is what makes "Conviction" so interesting. He is fed up with his line of work because he believed it contributed to his daughter's supposed death. He'll do whatever it takes to find his daughter, even if it means returning to the secret agent business. Sam is older and much more experienced, with an attitude of "been there, done that."

The plot isn't the only thing that's changed. "Conviction" reshapes the "Splinter Cell" gameplay from the ground up, adding many new features. The player can now sidle up against environmental items, thanks to a strong cover system. The enemy's artificial intelligence is much improved, as players will notice

changes in the environment, like a dead body or loud noise.

Quite possibly the biggest change is that players can choose whether or not to use stealth. Although older "Splinter Cell" games have emphasized the pure use of stealth, the player now can equip powerful armaments to take out enemies while also having the opportunity to attack from the shadows. The use of stealth is also available in challenges, where successfully taking out a group of enemies in the shadows is rewarded with currency for buying or upgrading new items.

A great selection of competitive and cooperative multiplayer modes also makes "Conviction" a solid action title. These fantastic new additions change what the series has been about and the end result is a varied and engaging experience.

In terms of presentation, "Conviction" doesn't break new ground the way the Xbox originally did, but it is still impressive. Cryptic flashback sequences, great cutscene design and solid in-game environment structure make the game look impressive. The game also introduces new objectives through the environment, which conveniently leads the player along the right path.

Tension builds from the shadows, but the visual design of "Conviction" always looks great. The voice acting remains superb, as Sam Fisher's character is presented with awesome writing and performance. It's not the best looking game on the 360, but "Conviction" definitely presents the series in an edgier and more action-based light.

"Splinter Cell: Conviction" doesn't feel like a "Splinter Cell" game. It has an emphasis on action, a brand new cover system and a personal and edgy feel, surprisingly out of place in the "Splinter Cell" mythology. Still, "Conviction" is gameplay tight and varied throughout, always introducing new challenges and ways to sneak past securities and enemies. The gameplay's diversity makes each stage unique. Though it might not capture the magic that the original "Splinter Cell" had so long ago, the gameplay advances of "Conviction" are unique and bring a new side to the stealth-action genre, improved, as players will notice

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