

# 'Traffic' an absorbing drama

TRAFFIC from page 5

ply chills, Caroline raped and zonked out in a hotel she frequently haunts that simply chills. And it sends the message: Anybody, anywhere.

This is a statement you've heard, no doubt, in any after-school special. Really, there is nothing original in "Traffic." It's been onscreen before, especially in the 1980s, when drug and anti-government films were the standard fare. What struck me in watching the movie is how familiar all this material is (the key drug witness wanting immunity, the corrupt cops, the daddy's little girl gone astray) and how it seems, for whatever reason, dated; free base cocaine was long ago replaced with easier, not to mention safer, drugs.

And yet, somehow, the craftsmanship of Soderbergh's direction and camerawork (he uses an assumed name) tie it together into a moving, ambitious work. Del Toro, as the cop, uses a quiet smolder to show his growing frustration with the Mexican status quo regarding drug cartels. Douglas, in a rather subdued performance, is troubled from nearly the opening frame; first, as he discovers how little can be done to fight drugs, and then, with his daughter, just why that is. A wide supporting cast, including Don Cheadle, Lusi Guzman and a nearly unrecognizable Benjamin Bratt, flesh out their small parts well.

I've left out most of the plot threads and intricacies on purpose, maybe because they're fine to discover individually, maybe also because I wasn't left in awe by the plot or dialogue, nor did I find much of "Traffic" unpredictable.

Rather, its uncommon strength lies in the domesticated moments of the film, the scene where a husband asks his wife how long she's known about her daughter's drug use and said nothing. The wife says six months, for no better reason than in college, she used drugs, came out all right, and look, now she's a millionaire. And so what harm could a little experimentation do...and how could she offer herself up as a hypocrite to her own daughter?

The only more eternal question beyond the meaning of life is what makes each one of us different. The user from the addict, the alive cop at a baseball game vs. the dead one in the desert, when they were both trying to do the same thing. "Traffic" puts these on the ledger and lets them play out; we aren't surprised by the results, and yet the journey of this film is as absorbing and dramatic as any in recent years.

"Traffic" starring Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Benicio Del-Toro. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. Rated R for language and drug use. Playing at the Plaza 4 and SouthPointe Cinema

# Holiday movies offers mixed bag of quality

The mixed bag of holiday movies mirrored the lackluster year that preceded it. A sampling of reviews:

**"All the Pretty Horses"**  
The Billy Bob Thornton directed film, "All the Pretty Horses," contains drawn dialogue and lost detail, while giving a hard to follow plot.

Though full of beautiful southwestern scenery with serene hills, rivers and wondrous sky, this could not help the film become more flowing and smooth. The shots used for the connection of scenes made this already choppy story line even more fragmented and stale.

The story is of a young Texan rancher, Matt Damon, who leaves his family ranch for Mexico after his father dies. He has to slowly accustom himself to Mexican culture and how to deal with the loss of family, friends, and love. This movie is not a love story, although it is proclaimed as one. Penelope Cruz stars in her second American movie as his love interest, a wealthy Mexican entrepreneur's daughter.

Romance between Cruz and Damon's characters lasts only 25 minutes through the whole movie. Damon's character and his friend work as ranchers on her father's land. They are arrested soon after they begin their jobs there, and life goes from fair to fearful and deadly.

There are many parts of this movie where there is no objection in sight, just a journey into the unknown for the character and the audience. Almost every turn seems a surprise because there is no lead up or detail to the story. One incident after another is concluded with a fade out for each scene. It is like watching life as it happens, and it is in slow motion.

This movie could have been so much more than almost two hours of scenery and jumbled speech. With little detail and an inconsistent story, this movie is not worth seeing. ★ ½ - Sarah Sumner

**"Cast Away"**  
Tom Hanks and Robert Zemeckis team up once again for blockbuster earnings and Academy Award hype, and rightfully so. "Cast Away" brings a moving depiction in which one man clings to survival, faced with extreme isolation and loneliness.

Hanks plays Chuck Noland, a FedEx troubleshooter obsessed with the concept of being on time. His fiancée, Kelly Frears, played by Helen Hunt, is tolerant and understanding of Noland's obligation to his work, as she accepts his untimely and unexpected departure from Christmas dinner to fly across the Pacific on business.

To no one's surprise, thanks to

trailers that left little out, the plane crashes and the sole survivor Noland is washed up on a desert island. Hanks carries the film for the next 90 minutes, whose performance is arguably his best to date. One can't help but connect with his character and feel what he is going through.

The anticlimactic ending however didn't quite do justice to an otherwise four star movie. That, and previews which revealed too much, took away from the film's potential effect were still not enough to erode the greatness of this film. ★★★ - Billy Smuck

**"Family Man"**  
Here's a movie about second chances as Jack Campbell, played by Nicolas Cage, finds out in this heartfelt dramatic comedy. It offers enjoyable entertainment, along with an incentive for some personal reflection time, regarding the choices we make in our lives.

Monetarily speaking, big business tycoon and Wall Street hotshot, Campbell is quite successful and content with his bourgeois lifestyle. It's obvious he loves his money and his life the way it is, which he communicates to Cash (Don Cheadle) when he says, "I've got everything I want." Cash whose role is similar to that of Clarence in the ever popular "It's a Wonderful Life," challenges Campbell's narrow-minded illusion of what personal happiness is and offers Jack a glimpse into the life he could have had.

This supernatural occurrence acts as a portal Jack is involuntarily

thrust into kicking and screaming. After some time in this alternative life he adapts, he favors it over his chosen path. A great lesson is posed in this film as Jack Campbell discovers the truth to Mastercard's slogan, "there are some things money can't buy..." ★★★ ½ - Billy Smuck

**"Miss Congeniality"**  
Sandra Bullock stars and produces "Miss Congeniality", where the classic beauty makeover scenario is revived with continuous laughs and a boost of female comedic talent. Though not a blockbuster winner for its opening weekend, it is slowly moving its way up over the holiday season. This movie is nonstop amusement with falls, kicks and trips from Bullock.

Bullock plays Gracie Hart, a FBI agent who is a tomboyish, clumsy and a somewhat lonely woman. She is chosen to go undercover as a contestant in a beauty pageant to catch a criminal mastermind. Though not graceful or attractive, Gracie is transformed from geek to chic in a matter of a few days, but still doesn't gain much refinement.

She and Benjamin Bratt's character have romantic tension throughout the movie, but the love connection that gets in the way of so many comedies holds back a few steps. This allows the slapstick to smack before the lips do. The prissy beauty pageant humor mixed with the FBI toughness leads to off-the-wall predicaments and brings about deeper levels of humanity for each character without becoming

sappy. ★★★ ½ - Sarah Sumner

**"What Women Want"**  
The relationship-driven comedy "What Women Want", divides itself between physical comedy, troubled interconnections and sincere benevolence. This movie appears to be all about the comedy for the first part of the show, but later sinks into relationship issues concerning parenting, work and man against himself.

Mel Gibson was paid \$20 million to play lead character, Nick, a self-centered womanizer who is passed over for a woman in consideration for a top advertising job. This divorced father of one

needs to care for his teenage daughter while her mother is away, try to steal the advertising promotion and impress his female boss.

While trying to figure out his feminine side and weasel his way into Helen Hunt's character's mind, he is electrocuted and gains the power to hear women's thoughts. He uses this newfound ability to his advantage in every way possible.

Amusing and heartfelt, "What Women Want" takes the audience for a more genuine and intimate story than what is expected from a slap-stick comedy. ★★★ ½ - Sarah Sumner

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