



12/6 3 DON'T THINK TWICE COMEDY
\$5 MILL BO 175 SCREENS R 92 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Keegan-Michael Key (TV---BOB'S BURGERS, ARCHER, AMERICAN DAD)

Mike Birbiglia's sad and tender *Don't Think Twice* follows the members of an improv comedy group, The Commune, that serves as the occasional launching point for talent to work on *Weekend Live*, an obvious stand-in for *Saturday Night Live*. A few of the current Commune players are pushing 40, and their optimism about their chances of showbiz discovery is inevitably calcifying over into desperation and bitterness. They each watch *Weekend Live* over pizza and weed, surveying the individual sketches with one thought running underneath all others like a ticker-tape: Why these people and not me? As any artist can testify, this question never has a satisfactory answer.

The narrative is centered on the comedy troupe's realization that some of its members might become stars, while most of the others are destined to do comedy on the side while waiting tables or teaching classes. The film isn't process-oriented, eliding much of the preparation necessary to working in theater or auditioning for a major television show. Instead, it's concerned with emotional portraiture and with behavioral escalation and resignation. Early on, Jack (Keegan-Michael Key) gets a job on *Weekend Live*, and we can see why. On stage, he's one of The Commune's stars because he's informed with the volcanic humanism that Key honed on *Key & Peele*. Key's real stardom sets him apart from the rest of the cast, including Birbiglia, and he renders poignant confusion out of Jack's futile attempts to stay "grounded" while fighting to ensure that the opportunity of a lifetime isn't squandered.

There are a dozen moments of such empathy and perception in *Don't Think Twice*. It's acutely embarrassing to watch as Birbiglia's character, Miles, attempts to seduce college girls in an apartment that's underneath what appear to be sewer pipes, which is also roughly the size of a gas station's bathroom. Birbiglia's refusal to beg for pity in such scenes is striking, as he recognizes that the sequences speak for themselves, and that Miles's sadness is self-evident, though the character's unwillingness to voice it often allows for a kind of tarnished dignity. These scenes serve as preparation for a catharsis, in which Miles proposes living with an old classmate as a couple, helping her to raise the baby growing in her belly. Miles's sales pitch to her is heartbreakingly qualified: "I know when you look at me, I get what you're seeing. I want to think that I can be better than that."



Yet the film's true star is Gillian Jacobs, who revels in a sense of emotional transparency that's reminiscent of Brie Larson. Her character, Samantha, suggests a bridge between the haves and the have-nots of The Commune, as she's a star who doesn't want stardom, bailing out on a *Weekend Live* audition because she claims to believe in the purity of improv (though we sense there's more to it than that), rendering her the ultimate betrayer of capitalist ethos. She chooses obscurity, allowing Jack, her boyfriend, to move on. Near the film's conclusion, as The Commune's theater is about to be torn down to allow for more corporate gentrification, Samantha has a startling moment of artistic purity. She turns her fear and confusion into a comic monologue that's not so much funny as vulnerable, sending out a lifeline under a pretense of making art, which Jacobs performs with wonderfully wounded elasticity, contrasting the rawness of Samantha's emotions with the stylized cartoonish-ness of her performative voice and physicality. It's a mark of Birbiglia's warmth and generosity that someone answers Samantha's plea.

This will rent as well as **THE LOBSTER, THE DARKNESS, SWISS ARMY MAN, CAPTAIN FANTASTIC, CAFÉ SOCIETY** and **ZOOLANDER 2**.



12/6 1 JASON BOURNE ACTION/THRILLER

\$142 MILL BO 4039 SCREENS PG-13 123 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Matt Damon (GOOD WILL HUNTING, COURAGE UNDER FIRE, THE MARTIAN)

Tommy Lee Jones (THE FUGITIVE)

Thus, *Jason Bourne* begins by showing what Jason Bourne does remember and also what he does not. As before, he's haunted by his own violent past, visible since 2002 in Doug Liman's [Bourne Identity](#), then revved up in Paul Greengrass' [Bourne Supremacy](#). The Bourne movie saga is built on his step-by-step recovery of self through bits of memory (happily, he appears unburdened by the [last Bourne outing](#), the one that involved neither Damon nor Greengrass). Here again, he's got some new bits, including flashbacks to the murder of his CIA agent dad (Gregg Henry), bits of smudgy, speedy, and repetitive chaos.

The repetition is key, for you more than for Bourne. His business is all about a kind of accelerated repeating: he always searches for information, he always eludes the CIA operatives who mean to kill him (while they pretend, as they put it, "to bring him in"), he always works with someone who doesn't expect to do so, and he always engages in smash-bang, zippy-zappy action, cut into pieces of bodies and vehicles and architecture.

Repetition creates your expectation. You know the plot, as much as it matters. This time, Bourne begins in a state of crisis, pursuing distraction in bare-knuckle fight-club-like fights in Greece (more precisely, he's pretending to fight, until he gets bored and takes out any given opponent in a single punch). His journey back—or forward, it's hard to tell and it hardly matters—begins again when someone from his past, in this case, Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles), discovers information about him (and his dad). As usual, surveillance tech is so insidious that they must meet in person to make the info exchange, and as usual, their efforts to hide themselves in a Greek street riot (a gambit that allows Greengrass to restage the climax of *Bloody Sunday* at a harrowingly high pitch) inevitably fail, allowing the CIA, and you, to hunt them down amid flailing bodies, fires, and assaults.



The hunt introduces the new players, who reprise the roles of old players. CIA Director Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones) means to "put down" Bourne, sending after him similarly trained killers, assembled into utterly expendable Alpha and Bravo teams and one who works alone, the Asset (Vincent Cassel). For all their talk about business, Dewey and the Asset are all about personal stakes and vendettas, vague as these might be.

Again and again, their faces evoke their investments. It helps that both their faces are extraordinarily gnarled, eyes sunk into their skulls, skin hanging like ancient paper from their cheekbones. Their faces tell stories that are at once personal and political, perspectives on the world that are cynical and desperate to hang on to an old order that never existed.

The faces of the young new players tell other stories, but these stories are still repetitive. These kids' faces are smooth and handsome. Reflected in monitors or glimpsed through windows, these faces indicate familiarity with today's technologies, as purveyors of the power of cyber war and cyber control rather than the power of abject physical brutality. You know that Bourne will prove them all wrong, from Dewey to Aaron. The newbies are played by rising movie stars brought in to breathe life into the franchise. CIA agent Heather Lee (Alicia Vikander) does a cursory search of Bourne's files, finds a doctor's note that he's still a "patriot" in need of a mission, and assumes what the CIA maintains in its records is true (has she never seen a Bourne movie?).

Heather's former Stanford classmate, Aaron (Riz Ahmed), embodies another sort of naïvete, a social media platform founder who now regrets that he promised a back door to the CIA (and where has

he been?). Aaron's presence allows *Jason Bourne* to namecheck Edward Snowden a couple of times, so its fractured story and storytelling might pretend to have a foothold in a world that resembles yours, a world where physical or temporal rationality might matter.

This will be as big a renter as **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, THE HUNTSMAN: WINTERS WAR, CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR, LONDON HAS FALLEN, THE FINEST HOURS** and **BATMAN V SUPERMAN**.



12/6 1 THE SECRET LIFE OF PETS FAMILY
\$355 MILL BO 4265 SCREENS PG 87 MINUTES DVD/COMBO
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

VOICES OF: Louis C. K., Eric Stonestreet, Kevin Hart.

Chris Renaud's *The Secret Life of Pets*, the story of two pet dogs, Max (Louis C.K.) and Duke (Eric Stonestreet), who find themselves sucked into the dangerous world of the New York City streets, doesn't lack for pedal-to-the-metal energy. Amusing throwaway gags abound: a lavish Busby Berkeley-like fantasy sequence involving dancing sausages singing the "We Go Together" number from *Grease*; a shrine for a dead duck named Ricky whose name carries legendary weight among a group of sewer-dwelling animal revolutionaries who call themselves Flushed Pets; and a dialogue exchange that pays out-of-nowhere tribute to the classic last two lines from [Some Like It Hot](#) (substitute its penultimate line with "I'm a cat" and you get the idea). Renaud tosses these bits of comic inspiration at a furious clip, and the messy pile-up can be exhilarating in the moment—the chaos of an id given free rein.



The rivalry that develops between the two, in which both pooches try to assert their dominance, offers a persuasive comic slant on real-life territorial canine behavior. A similar wit underpins the anthropomorphic characterizations of some of the story's other critters, like lazy fat cat Chloe (Lake Bell), who articulates the kind of aristocratic nonchalance that generally marks feline behavior; the easily distracted pug Mel (Bobby Moynihan), who seemingly goes after anything that moves; and Tiberius (Albert Brooks), a predatory falcon who oozes menace even at his most self-aware. The promise of a comedy built on such clever human translations of animal behavior, however, soon dissipates as the film becomes an increasingly shrill and over-the-top adventure yarn, climaxing with this year's second instance, after Pixar's [Finding Dory](#), of animals driving a truck. This might not matter so much if *The Secret Life of Pets* had the emotional weight to support its frantic action. But the initially antagonistic relationship between Max and Duke goes the predictable reconciliatory route, with Max developing more sympathy for Duke after the latter mournfully reveals his own origins as a stray who still regrets the way he accidentally abandoned his kindly owner.

And though some of the dramatic intrigue revolves around the heroic efforts of Gidget (Jenny Slate), a female Pomeranian with a crush on Max, to rescue the film's two protagonists, her undying affection for him is never explained, coming off as merely an attempt to introduce dramatic stakes in a film too taken with momentary comic whims to commit to any thematic through lines, much less pathos. By the end, *The Secret Life of Pets* is so lacking in emotional payoff that one can't help but regret that the filmmakers didn't aim higher with such a golden premise than fleeting comic diversions.

This will rent as well as **MINIONS, GOOSEBUMPS, THE GOOD DINOSAUR, ZOOTOPIA** and **THE JUNGLE BOOK**.



12/13 1 **BEN HUR** ACTION

\$28 MILL BO 2136 SCREENS PG-13 125 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Jack Huston (HAIL CAESAR!, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES, THE LONGEST RIDE)

Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, an ambitious interweaving of the adventures of the fictional Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur with the life of Jesus, was the bestselling novel of its day, a work noted for its ability to make Christianity accessible to modern readers and ground the stories of the New Testament in the real world. But in the public consciousness, Ben-Hur's life is understood as the lead-up to a chariot race. Even as early as 1907, the first film adaptation of the novel, a 15-minute silent one-reeler, stripped away the vast bulk of Wallace's opus, leaving little more than the chariot race. Soon after, Wallace's publisher put out a special edition of the novel excerpting only the text of the race scene, which it accompanied with detailed illustrations. The best-remembered of the novel's many adaptations is MGM's lavish 1959 version, a bloated, white-elephant epic whose tone of sanctified somnolence is disrupted only briefly by its still-rousing chariot race.

The makers of this latest *Ben-Hur* clearly recognize the primacy of the chariot race to the property's popularity and, accordingly, have constructed the entire film around this one sequence, opening on a flash-forward to the race, basing the central relationship between Ben-Hur (Jack Huston) and his adoptive brother, Messala (Toby Kebbell), on their shared love of horses, and foreshadowing the film's climax so frequently that it's hard to care about anything that happens along the way to the inevitable showdown in the circus.



Of course, it's also hard to care because the film is conceived and directed less as a sweeping epic than as a talky, plotty, melodramatic made-for-TV special in the vein of *The Bible* (which, like *Ben-Hur*, was co-produced by Mark Burnett and Roma Downey). Despite some pleasantly campy touches, from Morgan Freeman's ridiculous dreadlocks, to Rodrigo Santoro's portrayal of Jesus as a kind of sexy Jedi, to a hilariously dissonant final shot featuring Ben-Hur and Messala riding horses in slow motion set to a schmaltzy pop song, Timur Bekmambetov's film is a pretty staid affair.

The screenplay, co-written by Keith R. Clarke and John Ridley, compresses so much story into two hours, hitting not only all the major plot points from the three-and-a-half-hour 1957 version, but throwing in some additional backstory as well, that there's little time left over to create any definable characters. Ben-Hur and Messala are generic historical-fiction types with little in the way of personality or the suggestion of an interior life. Even Jesus, who appears in brief snippets throughout, is mostly reduced to a few famous catchphrases (such as "Those who live by the sword die by the sword").

Clarke and Ridley manage to find some contemporary political resonance in the milieu of Roman-occupied Judea, drawing some clear parallels between the Roman army's control of the Jews and the over-policing of black Americans, including a robust debate over the efficacy and righteousness of violence as a response to oppression (a cry of "Jewish lives matter!" would hardly be out of place here). But given the dictates of the film's narrative, they have little room to explore these issues beyond merely hinting at them.

Throughout, *Ben-Hur* keeps teasing us with the promise of the chariot race. Bekmambetov has demonstrated a penchant for exaggerated action sequences in films such as [Wanted](#) and [Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter](#), suggesting that this film's chariot race could have offered some over-the-top camp delirium. A training scene in which Ilderim (Freeman) instructs Ben-Hur that he must master the art of the "tilt"—raising the chariot onto one wheel as it goes around a bend, like a Roman equivalent of the

"Tokyo drift"—seems to promise as much. So, too, does a murky, hellish naval battle, shot from inside a ship and featuring a nonstop barrage of hot tar and flaming arrows. But when the chariot race finally happens, it's disappointingly directed in good taste, and with a total lack of imagination. Bekmambetov offers nothing new to the cinematic lexicon of the chariot race: chariots flip out, horses tumble, guys get run over. It all flies by in a flurry of forgettable, perfunctory images. The scene, like the rest of the film, is a hasty retreat that never finds a way to distinguish itself from its numerous forebears.

This will rent as well as **GHOSTBUSTERS, INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, NOW YOU SEE ME 2, and LONDON HAS FALLEN.**



12/13 2 BRIDGET JONES'S BABY COMEDY
\$24 MILL BO 2830 SCREENS R 123 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

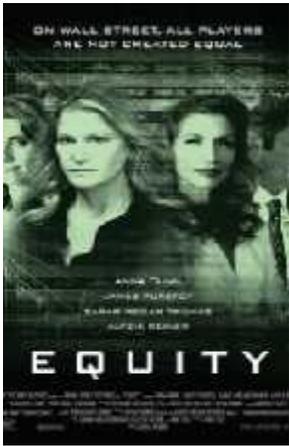
Renee Zellweger (LEATHER HEADS, WALK THE LINE, CASE 39, BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY, COLD MOUNTAIN)
Gemma Jones (TV---UNFORGOTTEN, DOC MARTIN, TEACUP TRAVELS)

Thinner, perhaps, but arguably not wiser, Renée Zellweger's Bridget Jones is back once again to wedge herself in between two complementary Mr. Rights and make an absolutely impossible time for herself. In Sharon Maguire's *Bridget Jones's Baby*, Bridget's approaching her mid-40s, still having a go as a journalist in an increasingly clickbait-defined medium, still hopelessly single after having broken up with the quote-unquote dashing Mark Darcy (Colin Firth), still unable to find a way to remove Eric Carmen's damned "All By Myself" from her iTunes playlist. Though at this point any rational friend would steer poor self-sabotaging Bridget toward a relationship therapist, the Pinkberry solipsism of this particular franchise all but requires our heroine to persist as a lovelorn martyr for her audience's benefit.

Bridget's failures in love and life serve much the same function as those [humorously self-deprecating memes](#) flooding Facebook news feeds everywhere. Bridget's okay, you're okay. You have to wonder, though, how long author Helen Fielding's charade can hold up when Bridget's world is so doggedly fixated on marriage and family as the only goal worth pursuing. If there was ever any fire in Bridget's broadcasting game before now, that ship notably sailed long before the start of *Bridget Jones's Baby*, which shows her phoning it in at work until the arrival of a hipster harem takes over her news department and threatens her livelihood.

This will rent pretty well. Check numbers for **MIKE AND DAVE NEED WEDDING DATES, NEIGHBORS 2, MOTHER'S DAY, and THE PERFECT MATCH.**





12/13 3 EQUITY DRAMA
\$2 MILL BO 856 SCREENS R 100 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Anna Gunn (TV---BREAKING BAD, CRIMINAL MINDS, PORTLANDIA)

James Purefoy (TV---EPISODES, THE FOLLOWING, ROOTS--- FILM--HIGH RISE, MOMENTUM)

Weaving in and out of the multiple storylines of Amy Fox's intricate screenplay, director Meera Menon paces *Equity* with a sure hand, juggling the different threads efficiently and confidently. It's all so involving in the moment that only afterward do some of the screenplay's faults begin to register. Fox is so insistent on emphasizing the feminist aspects of this tale that she pushes heavy-handed metaphors a bit too hard: senior investment banker Naomi Bishop's (Anna Gunn) boxing hobby; the Jenga tower that her boss, Randall (Lee Tergesen), frequently plays with in his office; the stuffed hedgehog that hedge-fund broker Michael Connor (James Purefoy)—who's also carrying on an affair with Naomi—presents as a gift to trader Benji Akers (Craig Bierko) in order to secretly pass on insider information.

Despite its faults, though, *Equity* ultimately succeeds in offering a fresh female-centered perspective on its genre material. [Wall Street](#) presented the financial world as a boy's club built almost entirely on machismo, with women relegated to being mere trophies. By centering on the perspectives of Naomi and her second-in-command, Erin Manning (Sarah Megan Thomas), Menon's film reveals an environment still riven with oppression and misogyny even as women have made progress toward breaking through the glass ceiling.



Women in the financial world, *Equity* suggests, are allowed to be tough, but not *too* tough, lest their usually male clients find them "off-putting," which is the industry-wide impression Naomi is now saddled with after the failure of a previous IPO she handled. As for Erin, she finds herself forced to delicately respond to the romantic advances of Ed (Samuel Roukin), the tech entrepreneur who leads the hot new social network Cachet, in order to preserve the soundness of the IPO they're about to launch, with Naomi slated to manage it. In *Equity*, women are still, to some extent, forced to use their sexual wiles to get what they want. This is also evident in the case of a former college friend of Naomi's, Samantha (Alysia Reiner), now a Justice Department prosecutor going after Benji for possible insider trading who's not above seducing men close to him in order to get the information she wants.

Though such gender-based minefields give the film sociological and psychological interests that distinguish it from the male-centered *Wall Street*, *Equity*, in the end, still finds its women engaging in exactly the kind of cutthroat manipulation and betrayal toward each other as the men in Stone's film. Menon's film fulfills the base-level expectations of this kind of financial thriller, with the requisite shifting alliances, double-dealing, and a climax that generates great tension from little more than pressure-cooker phone calls and computer screens. Thankfully, even if the film's business intrigue doesn't always escape a feeling of predictability, neither Menon nor Fox ever lose track of the characters and the complex motivations underlying their sometimes unsavory actions. *Equity's* depiction of the finance world as a deeply corrupt institution is hardly new, but the filmmakers' detailed, clear-eyed look at the challenges ambitious women face in this still male-dominated environment makes it feel near-revelatory.

This will rent as well as did **THE INFILTRATOR, CAPTAIN FANTASTIC, MONEY MONSTER, THE LOBSTER, and A HOLOGRAM FOR THE KING.**



12/13 1 FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS COMEDY
\$31 MILL BO 2734 SCREENS PG-13 111 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Meryl Streep (INTO THE WOODS, KRAMER VS KRAMER, JULIE & JULIA, AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY, THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY)

Hugh Grant (I'M STILL HERE, TWO WEEKS NOTICE, NINE MONTHS, FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL)

Florence Foster Jenkins was a mid-20th-century New York socialite who became known for her generosity to musicians and musical institutions, then grew notorious for the abysmal singing voice she insisted on sharing, through concerts and recordings, with an increasingly amused public. *Florence Foster Jenkins*, the latest take on her life (the most recent before that being [Marguerite](#)), is the story of a long con told from the point of view of the perpetrator and her enablers. That technique worked well in Penny Lane's recent [Nuts!](#), where it set up a second-act reversal that revealed the dark truths behind the triumphal myth that film's subject had created around himself. But director Stephen Frears and screenwriter Nicolas Martin construct a suspiciously simple and sympathetic story about Jenkins (Meryl Streep) and play it straight through (though not entirely straight, as a streak of broad comedy runs through the film), leaving audiences to wonder about the very things that make Jenkins's story intriguing in the first place.

As we learn in the film, Jenkins was considered a child prodigy on the piano, well enough known to perform for a president. So was she a genuinely gifted pianist, or were the people around her then as deluded about her musical talents as she was later in life? And if she was talented as a child, and loved music as much as she purported to, how could she have so misjudged her own abilities as an adult? Some have speculated that the syphilis Jenkins contracted as a young woman from the husband she was married to only briefly, or the mercury and arsenic she took as a cure, might have ruined her hearing, but the script contains no hint of that or any other explanation for her blithe, decades-long run of laughably awful performances.

The film is clear about the role Jenkins's inherited wealth played in her "career," though it lays the responsibility for having purchased the illusion of success wholly on the shoulders of her business manager and life partner, St. Clair Bayfield (Hugh Grant). We see Bayfield carefully curating the audiences allowed in to her initial, small performances and paying critics to write puff pieces about her, but his machinations are portrayed as a comic yet touching indication of his devotion to her—or perhaps his determination not to kill the goose that lays his golden eggs. Grant plays Bayfield, a failed actor, with tightly coiled self-containment papered over with an easy charm that feigns openness, making his motivations intriguingly opaque: Is Bayfield Jenkins's parasite, her paramour, or a little of both?

Meanwhile, we're asked to admire Jenkins's tenacity and empathize with a poor-little-rich-girl naïvete and lack of guile so profound that Bayfield's pet name for her is "Bunny." Streep is a gifted enough singer to imitate a bad one convincingly, and she nails the deluded diva's odd phrasing, flat notes, and penchant for overemphasizing some notes and petering out on others. (When we hear the real Jenkins on the soundtrack at the end of the film, it's hard to tell the difference.) Streep's vocal performances, which she delivers in flamboyant costumes big on kitschy extras like jumbo tiaras and angel wings, are expertly overdone—but, in the film's strongest achievement, she makes it impossible to laugh too hard without feeling guilty.

Streep inhabits Jenkins's ample body fully, giving her an endearing hint of physical clumsiness and a childlike sincerity and single-mindedness that sometimes



collapses into an equally primal, trembling vulnerability. When Jenkins first realizes, at the start of a concert she booked for herself at Carnegie Hall, that the people in the packed hall are laughing at her, the tears that seep into Streep's eyes and the desperate sidelong looks she shoots at Bayfield make the utterly justified guffaws seem crude and cruel.

But is it really everyone's duty to prop up the fragile egos of any delusional millionaire who demands public admiration? Once again, the film neatly sidesteps a sticky question, stifling our laughter rather than dealing with its implications. The fictional Agnes Stark (Nina Arianda), a portly businessman's brassy blond trophy wife, becomes Jenkins's improbable savior this time around. Agnes laughed herself silly the first time she heard Jenkins sing, yet she defends her at Carnegie Hall, hectoring the audience for laughing and insisting that they all cheer instead. They obey, Jenkins takes their applause at face value, and the show goes on as Jenkins reverts to her customary happy haze of denial. But feigning approval that way is more harmful enablement than it is a kindhearted white lie. In fact, it may not be kind at all, given that every phony ovation probably makes it that much harder to accept the truth when—surely inevitably—it hits home, as it does for Jenkins the next day, when she reads the review of her performance in the *New York Post*.

A long line of social satirists, from Jonathan Swift to the Marx Brothers to Amy Schumer, would argue that a wild whoop of derisive laughter is an appropriate response, maybe even a corrective, to delusions of grandeur. But not *Florence Foster Jenkins*, which champions coddling people like Jenkins and treats critical thinking as the enemy. Not only do the filmmakers wink at Bayfield for bribing lesser critics, but they treat the *Post's* Earl Wilson (Christian McKay) like a self-righteous prig for insisting that his obligation to tell his readers the truth and champion the art of singing outweighs any inclination he might have to protect Jenkins's feelings. Streep and Grant are mesmerizing, both separately and apart, and one or the other of them is nearly always on the screen, injecting considerable humor and humanity into this story of a legendarily lousy performer.

This one will rent as well as **POP STAR, MONEY MONSTER, EYE IN THE SKY, HOW TO BE SINGLE and LADY IN THE VAN.**



**12/13 1 MISS PERIGRINE'S HOME FOR
PECULIAR CHILDREN FAMILY**
\$53 MILL BO 2932 SCREENS **PG-13** 127 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

**Eva Green (SIN CITY: A DAME TO KILL FOR, 300: RISE OF AN EMPIRE, WHITRE BIRD IN A BLIZZARD)
Samuel L. Jackson (PULP FICTION, SNAKES ON A PLANE, THE LEGEND OF TARZAN, CELL, CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER)**

After witnessing the strange circumstances of his grandfather's death, Jacob encounters clues that inspire memories of the stories his grandfather, Abraham (Terence Stamp), told him as a child about a mysterious orphanage on a Welsh island and its peculiar, wondrous inhabitants. And at the urging of a therapist (Allison Janney) charged with helping him to distinguish the differences between fantasy and reality, Jacob eventually stumbles upon a kind of wonderland after he and his father, Franklin (Chris O'Dowd), travel to the island to determine the veracity of his grandfather's remarkable tales.

But even as the peculiarities of this world are revealed to Jacob in ways that CGI could only have made possible, the film's jolts of the ornately weird play second fiddle to the quietly felt sense of the characters' alienation. In effect, Burton sensitively keys us to Jacob's anxious befuddlement over what Abraham might have truly experienced here long ago during World War II, understanding the boy's search as spiritual yearning: a quest for wonder, however dangerous, as a salve for the humdrum of a misunderstood life.

Throughout the film, Burton fixates elegantly on the eponymous children's unique gifts. Once Jacob arrives at Miss Alma LeFay Perigrine's (Eva Green) orphanage, after passing through a loop that allows its maker (here, Miss Peregrine herself) to live a particular day over and over again, so as to stave off the horrors of the future, he is immediately subsumed in the routines, ordinary and not so ordinary alike, of a place trapped in a kind of existential amber. Among the peculiars are Enoch (Finlay MacMillan), who has the power to give life to the inanimate with little animal hearts; Hugh (Milo Parker), who can direct the many, many bees that live within his stomach; and Olive (Lauren McCrostie), who can levitate and must wear a pair of lead shoes so she doesn't fly away and disappear into the heavens.



In this place, where time is reset daily just before a German plane can drop a bomb atop the orphanage, the peculiarities of these children are mostly useful for minor things, such as little Bronwyn (Pixie Davies) using her superheroic strength to pull enormous carrots from the ground, or Olive removing her shoes and tying a rope around her waist so as to bring a fallen critter back to its nest. These children—and, in turn, Burton's camera—take visible joy in expressing these peculiarities for Jacob, and this celebration of difference allows him to embrace his own peculiarity, shared by Abraham, of being able to see evils that no one else can. It's a gift that proves useful when Baaron (Samuel L. Jackson) and his hollowgasts (think Jack Skellington by way of [Pan's Labyrinth's](#) Pale Man) come knocking on the orphanage's door, hungry for the peculiars' eyes, the ingestion of which will make them human again.

A vision in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* of Jacob pulling a floating Olive from a rope across a Welsh beachside and toward a battle with the hollowgasts is as haunting as any Burton ever summoned, namely for its multitude of meaning: for teasing the romance that builds between Jacob and Olive, and for the sense of moral agency and empathy that so clearly informs Jacob's gait. Also impressive is the daring, force, and tact with which Jane Goldman's screenplay presents Jacob's saga as a metaphor for the Holocaust, evoking its horrors in everything from Jacob taking Miss Peregrine's peculiars to the orphanage's attic and away from an advancing hollowgast, to Baaron's moral "hollowness" and his grotesque appetite for destruction.

Throughout, Burton shuttles his peculiars in and out of loops, through past and present as they fight the hollowgasts, and his set pieces exude an alternately frightful and comic tenor that rarely feels off-balance. Baaron is never scarier than in the film's climax, where Olive, who also has the ability to blow powerful gusts of air from her mouth, pins the milky-eyed menace to a wall, where he hangs for a minute or two while throwing shade at the girl, arrogantly marking the time before she runs out of air and he can resume his very complicated evil-doing. The patience of Jackson's performance is of a piece with Burton's own, as the filmmaker moves from one incident to the next with a spatial coherence that often approaches the majestic.

For all of its moral anguish and aesthetic riches, the film doesn't quite stick the landing, as the children's release of all that is weird within them scans less as a response to everything that's hurt them up to this point in their lives than a lazy script mandate. Burton, caught between a rock and a hard place of sorts, doesn't fully embrace the poignancy inherent in this material, even as his restrained approach nonetheless reminds us of the distinct and peculiar coyness that was always at the heart of his best films.

This will rent as well as did **GHOSTBUSTERS**, **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE**, **THE ANGRY BIRDS MOVIE**, **BATMAN V SUPERMAN**, and **ZOOTOPIA**.



12/27 3 SOUTHSIDE WITH YOU DRAMA
\$7 MILL BO 924 SCREENS PG-13 84 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Tika Sumpter (RIDE ALONG 2, GET ON UP, RIDE ALONG, SPARKLE)

Parker Sawyers (KICK ASS 2, JACK RYAN: SHADOW RECRUIT, ZERO DARK THIRTY, HYDE PARK ON HUDSON)

Richard Tanne's *Southside with You* is a romantic drama in the mold of Richard Linklater's "Before" trilogy, with two characters walking and talking throughout a city, getting to know each other, flirting, verbally parrying, and generally dancing around the topic of romance until, finally, a physical gesture seals the deal. The crucial difference is that the two main characters here are destined for a unique sort of greatness, as the film is a speculative dramatization of the first date between a future president of the United States, Barack Obama (Parker Sawyers), and his first lady, Michelle Obama (Tika Sumpter). The film, then, exudes an aura of political fan fiction at the outset, as a conventional romance is given potentially unearned heft simply because of the heavy import of the based-on-true-life characters involved.

But Tanne has more on his mind than simply delivering swoon-worthy genre pleasures. Naturally, for a film as dialogue-heavy as this, these intentions are made evident in the words Barack and Michelle exchange. There turns out to be a reason why Michelle is reluctant to commit to this being a date, despite Barack's clear intentions in that direction: She's deeply conscious of her status as an up-and-coming female black lawyer, which puts her at an immediate disadvantage, she feels, compared to the male associate she's advising who's now propositioning her for romance.

Southside with You may not announce itself as hagiography, but it's hero-worshipful to its core.



With the zeal of two talented lawyers arguing their cases, Barack challenges Michelle on her assumptions and anxieties, while she prods him on his own past as a pothead in high school and his lingering resentment toward his late father, who was mostly absent throughout Barack's life. This kind of conversation distinguishes itself from the relatively more insular talk between Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy's characters in *Before Sunrise*, which, despite occasional ventures toward the philosophical, rarely betrayed the kind of broader social consciousness that Barack and Michelle exude in this film.

This should rent as well as **THE INFILTRATOR, THE PERFECT MATCH, RACE, 45 YEARS and LADY IN THE VAN.**



12/20 1 THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN ACTION
\$77 MILL BO 2789 SCREENS PG-13 133 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Denzel Washington (SAFE HOUSE, FLIGHT, THE NEGOTIATOR, 2 GUNS, UNSTOPPABLE, TRAINING DAY)
Chris Pratt (GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY, HER, DELIVERY MAN, THE FIVE-YEAR ENGAGEMENT)

The core story of *The Magnificent Seven*, of a group of gunslingers who achieve glory by protecting meek villagers from a siege, is so elemental that it's strange to call Antoine Fuqua's latest film a remake of either John Sturges's 1960 western of the same name or Akira Kurosawa's original [Seven Samurai](#). Nonetheless, the film, co-written by novelist and *True Detective* creator and writer Nic Pizzolatto, adds nothing of particular value to the source material, making for another disposable adaptation of a preexisting property in a year littered with forgettable blockbusters.



The crucial difference between this film and its predecessors is the nature of the villains. Typically they've been a posse of anonymous, lowly bandits with no clear hierarchy. Here, however, the raiders are organized under the banner of wealthy, wannabe tycoon Bartholomew Bogue (Peter Sarsgaard), who laments how hard he has to work to seize land in comparison to moneyed elite like the Rockefellers. "This country has long equated democracy with capitalism, capitalism with God," he tells the residents of the small mining town of Rose Creek, marking him not as a rogue element, but an inevitability of the bureaucratic takeover of the West. Sarsgaard long ago honed the drawled disdain that informs Bogue's every word, and the businessman speaks as if he knows talk is money and wants to spend as little as possible.

Another notable deviation from prior versions of the story is the diversity of the film's main cast. Denzel Washington heads up the seven cowboys as bounty hunter Sam Chisholm, and the actor settles into the same weary, moral badass that he played in Fuqua's [The Equalizer](#). Washington, in his first western, fits right into this genre's parameters, with his measured, lightly sardonic speech patterns and his loping, Gary Cooper-esque gait. Chisholm's actions are so deliberate that he doesn't even dump the spent casings out of his revolver, instead swiftly ejecting each one by one as he cycles through his gun's chambers. Also among the seven are Korean close-quarters combat expert Billy Rocks (Lee Byung-hun), Mexican gunfighter Vasquez (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo), and Red Harvest (Martin Sensmeier), an exiled Comanche. These four push back at the casual racism of their white comrades, albeit usually in scenes of light comedy around campfires and dinner tables.

If the cast members distinguish themselves from each other by ethnicity, they also bring different fighting styles to the film's major skirmishes. Ex-Confederate Goodnight Robicheaux (Ethan Hawke), for example, is a sniper, and his patient precision is filmed in relatively sedate shots. Billy, meanwhile, ducks and weaves among foes, slicing and sometimes throwing his knives so fast that Bogue's dimwitted

henchmen barely have time to react. Fellow member Josh Farraday (Chris Pratt) is an expert quickdraw who never seems to miss a pistol shot, while the gigantic Jack Horne (Vincent D'Onofrio) is a seemingly invulnerable and unstoppable force, brutally dispatching foes with his bare hands when he doesn't have any other weapons at his disposal.

Bolstering the group's fighting prowess is the shrewd placement of dynamited booby traps around Rose Creek, which yields an explosive climax that's so entertaining in its organized chaos that only in retrospect does one wonder why, exactly, the townspeople would sign off on a plan to save their home by reducing half of it to flaming wood chips. Nonetheless, there's a perfunctory nature to so much of the filmmaking; Fuqua was once known, by supporters and detractors, for his hyper-stylized direction, but he has by now settled into a largely anonymous filmmaker. The huge explosions and pandemonium of the final act recall less Kurosawa than Takashi Miike, whose far superior [13 Assassins](#) similarly added ostentatious action spectacle to the narrative concept. Once upon a time, Fuqua might have been able to offer some kind of kinetic approximation of the energy of that film, but as passably entertaining as *The Magnificent Seven* is, it never surrenders to the abandon of its action, and as such never feels like it shifts out of first gear.

This will be a huge renter with titles as diverse as **THE LEGEND OF TARZAN, CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, MONEY MONSTER** and **FREE STATE OF JONES**.



12/20 1 STORKS FAMILY

**\$52 MILL BO 3125 SCREENS PG 87 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX**

VOICES OF: Andy Samberg, Kelsey Grammer, Jennifer Aniston.

Parents tell their kids that storks deliver babies because their own parents told them the same thing. The fable isn't manipulative in the same manner of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny luring children into looking forward to religious holidays vis-à-vis candy and toys. Instead, it's a legacy of punting on one of the most basic facts about human existence, all because we somehow collectively believe it to be healthier to not talk about what *Kindergarten Cop's* pint-sized Joseph [knew all too well](#): that it's healthier to indulge in infantilism than work on a solid foundation of emotional awareness. (And we wonder why some grown men need to dress in diapers to get off.)

That said, sex can benefit from a connection to frivolity and playfulness. So maybe it's not the worst thing in the world that *Storks*, the new film from the Warner Animation Group, doesn't take many cues from Pixar's tear-jerking playbook. In fact, it fitfully benefits from its lack of gravity, as does the film's depiction of Cornerstone, the stork flock's Amazon-like superstore perched above the clouds at the top of Stork Mountain. The store's days delivering babies are long gone, and now the storks dedicate their efforts to delivering Fitbits, laundry detergent, stoneware, and everything else but babies.

It's never clear exactly why Cornerstone CEO Hunter (Kelsey Grammer) is so firmly against the infant market, nor does the film explain how any babies were born after the superstore switches to packages, unless the entire world came to the immediate, logical conclusion that they needed to procreatively start banging henceforth. But the trade-off for that lack of clarity is a film that aims—and, largely, fails—to approach the exhilaratingly engineered soullessness of [The LEGO Movie](#). (That cake-and-eat-it-too masterpiece's writer-directors, Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, served as executive producers here.) *Storks* isn't clever enough, nor does it have the entire history of licensed



pop-culture touchstones to populate its cast, to achieve [The LEGO Movie](#)'s impenetrable synergy...er, energy.

But even given its silly A-story involving management-bound Junior's (Andy Samberg) burgeoning and promotion-threatening affection for human orphan Tulip (Katie Crown), who was the last baby off the assembly line before it was shut down, *Storks*'s zany thrust wins out.

This will rent as well as **THE JUNGLE BOOK, ZOOTOPIA, MINIONS, ICE AGE: COLLISION COURSE and KUNG FU PANDA 3.**



12/20 1 SUICIDE SQUAD ACTION
\$322 MILL BO 4387 SCREENS **PG-13** 123 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 3 DISC 3 D COMBO
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Will Smith (CONCUSSION, HITCH, MEN IN BLACK, FOCUS, HANCOCK, ALI)

Jared Leto (DALLAS BUYERS CLUB, MR. NOBODY, CHAPTER 27)

David Ayer's *Suicide Squad*, a third-tier DC property about a team of supervillains sent on suicide missions in exchange for time off their prison sentences, is the logical extension of [Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice](#), in which Batman regarded Superman's omnipotence and saw only the possibility of its misapplication. If Zack Snyder's film laid out the individual tensions between heroes who mistrust each other's motives, *Suicide Squad* represents the collective response to such potential threats. The squad in question is a bureaucratic fabrication, a secret team designed equally to meet supernatural threats and provide plausible deniability to the government. Centering a film on an ensemble of self-absorbed murderers and thieves provides anarchic possibilities for the increasingly hackneyed superhero genre.

But that sense of abandon never materializes. For the first 30 minutes of the film, Ayer simply introduces the team's members, using the framing device of Waller briefing her superiors to flatly list each criminal's rap sheet. The director attempts to spice up this roll call with visual diversions like animated text appropriate for each character, such as a steely, businesslike font that lists the weapon proficiencies of assassin Deadshot (Will Smith), or the bad-child bubble letters and tattoo imprints for Harley Quinn's (Margot Robbie) attributes. In practice, however, the animations come off as a pale imitation of the more energetic incorporation of comic-book techniques in [Scott Pilgrim vs. the World](#). Worse, once the team members begin interacting with one another, we're in effect treated to second introductions.

Things pick up slightly once the team is finally assembled and *Suicide Squad* lays out its intriguingly warped morality. There's something to be said for a film that presents an entire group of killers and suggests that Amanda Waller (Viola Davis), the calculating official who conceived the team, is more evil than any of her involuntary recruits. The absent Superman also casts a long shadow over the film; Waller acknowledges his heroism, but in order to justify her clandestine operation, she hawkishly promotes what a malevolent version of the Kryptonian might do to global security. To be sure, this rogue Kal-El of fantasy might have made for a more compelling antagonist than Enchantress (Cara Delevingne), a possessing spirit who spawns nondescript blob people as an army and wants to destroy Earth simply because she's the villain in a DC film. Recent superhero flicks have suffered terribly from their unmemorable villains, but Enchantress



may be the most forgettable yet.

Unfortunately, the film never captures the unhinged energy that a story entirely populated by bad guys should. The squad members are never introduced as unrepentantly violent people, but they're almost immediately defanged by mitigating circumstances that portray them as scarcely different from the prevailing antiheroes of recent comic-book films. If Snyder's Batman callously killed thugs without compunction and Superman seemed unconcerned with his collateral damage, how can one be expected to hate Deadshot, who wants to reunite with his young daughter, or pyrokinetic gangbanger El Diablo (Jay Hernandez), who's wracked with grief over accidentally murdering his family? Even Harley Quinn, the film's wildest card, is softened considerably from her initial introduction, her sociopathic glee muted by her incongruous sympathy for others and fantasies of a normal life.

This one will rent as well as **CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR**, **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE**, **INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE**, **LONDON HAS FALLEN**, **X-MEN: APOCALYPSE** and **NEIGHBORS 2**.



12/20 1 SULLY DRAMA

\$115 MILL BO 3723 SCREENS PG-13 96 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Tom Hanks (BIG, BRIDGE OF SPIES, THE MONEY PIT, SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, PHILADELPHIA)
Aaron Eckhart (LONDON HAS FALLEN, MY ALL-AMERICAN, OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN, THE DARK KNIGHT, MEET BILL)

If only Whip Whitaker, Denzel Washington's sozzled pilot from Robert Zemeckis's [Flight](#), would've had the temerity to call a halt to the NTSB hearings into the crash of his Atlanta-bound plane with an impassioned reminder that he saved all but six lives after total midflight failure. How inspiring it would've been for him to first admit to his alcoholism, but then decimate the entire proceedings with a snarl: "That's the kiss-ass generation we're in right now. We're really in a pussy generation. Everybody's walking on eggshells." Rather, those are the words that were pull-quoted ad nauseam from Clint Eastwood's recent *Esquire* interview. Eastwood's new film could scarcely be more of a total inversion of the earlier Zemeckis pilot-on-trial melodrama, which posited that acts of heroism exist in isolation from the complexity of the human condition. With *Sully*, Eastwood presses the case that it's that very complexity that distracts us from the pure dignity of a noble act.

Eastwood modulates his way into this conclusion by fracturing his depiction of the "Miracle on the Hudson" into oblique flashbacks, none of them entirely declarative. These fragments pepper the immediate aftermath of U.S. Airways Flight 1549's emergency descent alongside Manhattan after striking a flock of geese. Not one life was lost in the crash. Thus, so far as the world knows, Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger (Tom Hanks) represents the second coming. The event preceded the inauguration of Barack Obama by only a few days, and for a brief moment amid our massive economic downturn, Sully's actions seemed to suggest that there needn't be any audacity surrounding hope.

Sully presses the case that the complexity of the human condition distracts us from the pure dignity of a noble act.

And yet, out come the investigative bureaucrats and insurance adjusters, all hell-bent on placing asterisks next to Sully's decision to make a forced water landing—consigning the plane itself to the salvage heap—rather than attempt to turn back around and land the plane at LaGuardia. Hanks's Sully is either too decent a man to



be incredibly upset about the committee's insinuations that he put his entire manifest of 155 souls unnecessarily in danger's way or too caught up in the PTSD of the experience to contradict their claims. Eastwood doesn't ask Hanks to telegraph his emotions; he doesn't particularly indicate that they'd be relevant in the first place. Those would just complicate the simplicity of his good deed, in the same manner that the NTSB investigations questioning Sully's instincts pollute his accomplishments.

In Eastwood's America, we all have a habit of making everything much too complicated, and the director's skepticism comes to a head as Sully and his co-pilot, Jeff Skiles (Aaron Eckhart), are forced to answer to a series of simulations purporting to show that, indeed, the plane needn't have splash-landed. (And speaking of things that Eastwood believes shouldn't be so complicated, one of the film's most glaring flaws is in how little it gives Laura Linney, playing Sully's wife, to do—namely, stress out in her living room with a phone in her hand. Between this and [Captain Phillips](#), which utterly wasted Catherine Keener, it doesn't pay to play Hanks's wife in a docudrama.)

All that said, at no point does Eastwood apply the heavy hand that characterized some of his other late-period prestige efforts (most notably [Mystic River](#) and [Flags of Our Fathers](#)). Maybe it's the amount of reverence he has for his subject, and just maybe it's a testament to Hanks's continuing dignity as a performer, but somehow even framing the entire film around the simultaneous persecution and deification of a true everyman caught in an extraordinary circumstance doesn't result in cantankerousness. For one refreshing moment we have an Eastwood film that very nearly strikes the same unsophisticated but delicate tone of his obligatory end-credits ditty.

This will rent as big as movies as diverse as **GHOSTBUSTERS, THE LEGEND OF TARZAN, CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR, EYE IN THE SKY and JOY.**



12/27 1 SNOWDEN DRAMA

\$21 MILL BO 2498 SCREENS R 134 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Joseph Gordon-Levitt (THE NIGHT BEFORE, THE WALK, THE INTERVIEW, SIN CITY)

Director Oliver Stone's latest examination of American geopolitical power tells essentially the same story as Laura Poitras's [Citizenfour](#), replacing Edward Snowden's dry firsthand accounts of his personal and professional life as part of the United States Intelligence Community with dramatic reenactments that attempt to justify his decision to become a government whistleblower. Anyone familiar with [Citizenfour](#) or Snowden's leaks to the press will find no new revelations about the National Security Agency in this film, which stars Joseph Gordon-Levitt in the title role. The film is a kind of public defense of Snowden, providing an apologia for the accused spy by deflecting the viewer's attention from the consequences of his actions to the personal hardships and moral struggles that led to them in the first place.

This mostly takes the form of dramatizing Snowden's tumultuous relationship with his girlfriend, Lindsay (Shailene Woodley), and the various bureaucratic mentors who he alternately elates and disappoints, stand-ins for the U.S. government as an all-seeing Big Brother against whom he ultimately rebels. Scenes featuring Snowden revealing his information to Poitras (Melissa Leo), Glenn Greenwald (Zachary Quinto), and Ewen MacAskill (Tom Wilkinson) are reenacted almost verbatim from [Citizenfour](#), evidence that Stone has little original to add to the story that wasn't already covered in the documentary.

There's a basic irony about making such a film in the first place that Stone seems to miss entirely, which is that Snowden's self-professed motivation behind exposing the NSA's domestic surveillance program to the public was to start a national conversation on the subject. Snowden says repeatedly, both here and in [Citizenfour](#), that he doesn't want the conversation to be about him because that would distract from what, in his mind, is the real issue: whether or not the U.S. government is justified in spying on its own citizens in the name of national security. The film, however, privileges his personal wellbeing as the central theme, rather than the privacy and security interests of the American people, thereby undermining the whistleblower's own stated goals.



Nonetheless, the appearance of the real-life Snowden at the end of the film reveals the true nature of his actions, albeit unintentionally. The film's final scenes, showing a serene and smiling Snowden inside his new home in Russia, reveals the extent to which he's become a willing pawn of the Russian government in its propaganda war against America. Stone's film fails to grapple with the fact that this supposed champion of government transparency and Internet privacy is now a tool of a government that has little of the former and is increasingly cracking down on the latter. In becoming a puppet of Vladimir Putin, himself a former KGB spymaster, Snowden has become instrumental in undermining U.S. national security by allowing Putin to disseminate the illusion that Snowden's revelations have given Russia some kind of moral high ground over America in the world.

Early in the film, Stone bends over backward to establish Snowden's patriotic credentials, portraying him as a proud American who wanted to serve his country in any way possible. Snowden is the scion of a family with a long tradition in the U.S. military and his physical frailty, high IQ, and superior computer aptitude eventually led him out of boot camp and into the offices of the CIA. He's depicted as a brilliant, politically conservative computer programmer who came to question his fundamental beliefs after meeting his girlfriend. According to the film, it was a combination of Snowden's increasingly leftist politics and the moral, physical, and psychological strain of his work for the government that caused him to sacrifice his career to expose what he saw as an unjustifiable breach of citizens' privacy by the government.

This will rent as well as **THE INFILTRATOR, CAPTAIN FANTASTIC, GENIUS, A HOLOGRAM FOR THE KING, THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING** and **OUR KIND OF TRAITOR**.