



2/7 1 **ALMOST CHRISTMAS** COMEDY

\$46 MILL BO 2379 SCREENS PG-13 111 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Omar Epps (TV---HOUSE, SHOOTER, RESURRECTION)
Danny Glover (LETHAL WEAPON, BACK IN THE DAY,
DIRTY GRANDPA, CONSUMED, RAGE)**

In the movies, Christmas is a time of reunion, reconciliation, and reparation, the season for broken families to convene and work through their problems and bridge their divides—to, in essence, become a family again. This template has served as the basis for any number of holiday comedies and Hallmark Channel movies, and writer-director David E. Talbert has pulled it off the shelf once again for *Almost Christmas*, a fitfully funny but doggedly conventional comedy about a dysfunctional Alabama family gathering together for their first Christmas since the sudden passing of their beloved matriarch.

As a result of the Talbert family having lost their center, long-simmering tensions are allowed to come to a boil. Walter (Danny Glover), the clan's patriarch, can do little but look on helplessly as his adult children (Gabrielle Union, Romany Malco, Kimberly Elise, and Jessie T. Usher) squabble while wrestling with their own private and professional issues, including low self-esteem, a political campaign, and a philandering husband. This is the kind of film where every character is struggling with a secret personal dilemma, all of which are aired and worked through by the time the credits roll.

Talbert mostly plays the Meyers' dysfunctions as Southern-fried farce, achieving a pleasantly manic pulse from the push and pull of its performers. J.B. Smoove, playing Walter's doggish son-in-law, contributes some *Christmas Vacation*-style slapstick, and Mo'Nique, as the brassy Aunt May, provides the requisite outrageous one-liners ("I have vibrators older than that child!"). If the film is rarely laugh-out-loud funny, it at least avoids the kind of strained excessiveness of so many family comedies.

It helps that *Almost Christmas's* atmosphere is warm and cozy—all knit sweaters and comfort food—and that Talbert allows a credible familiarity to develop among his actors, who bounce off each other with a mix of comfort and agitation that captures the ambient hum of annoyance so often generated by relatives in close proximity. Union and Elise, in particular, bring a palpable sense of mutual disdain to their characters' bitter sororal rivalry.

The film's homely vibe, though, is undercut by the emotional manipulations and simplistic moral dilemmas of Talbert's writing. The filmmaker piles on the subplots (a character struggling with an addiction to painkillers, a homeless shelter threatened by real estate developers), attempting to wring as much melodrama out of his characters as he can while covering the film in the thinnest patina of social conscience. He shows no investment in these issues, instead simply exploiting them for their inherent sentimental appeal.



Almost Christmas is much more affecting in its simpler moments, particularly those revolving around food. Throughout, Walter tries and fails to replicate his wife's famous sweet potato pie recipe, a centerpiece of the family's Christmas celebrations. His first attempt is a disaster, and his subsequent tries still fail to get the dish quite right. Only at the film's end, when Walter relaxes and channels his wife's memory, is he able to make the pie just as she did. The symbolism here isn't subtle, but it's poignant in its way, suggesting the rememorative power of cooking and food's link to the past.

Maybe Talbert should have paid closer attention to this symbol: a simple dish that excels when quality ingredients are combined in the perfect proportion. *Almost Christmas* assembles many of the right elements and combines them with care, but then fits them into an overly familiar narrative structure.

This will rent as well as did **MEET THE BLACKS, NEIGHBORS 2, BAD MOMS, HOW TO BE SINGLE, THE HOLLARS.**



2/7 2 LOVING DRAMA

\$13 MILL BO 572 SCREENS PG-13 123 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Ruth Negga (TV---PREACHER, AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D,
SECRET STATE)**

**Joel Edgerton (BLACK MASS, JANE GOT A GUN, LIFE,
EXODUS: GODS AND KINGS)**

The film's first third traces the ordeal faced by interracial couple Richard and Mildred Loving (Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga) in Virginia's Caroline County, as they travel outside the state's borders to marry in D.C. Almost immediately upon their return, Richard and Mildred are locked up for "cohabitation" and Mildred has to spend a weekend in the county jail. Richard hires a lawyer, but the best he and his new wife can hope for in early-1960s Virginia is a 25-year ban from being in the state together at the same time.

The action then shifts back to D.C., where the couple spend five years raising three kids and trying to get situated to city life. Finally, Nichols gets to the civil rights case that is the Lovings' legacy, finding some momentum as he bares down on a procedural plot, which follows the ACLU's legal team (Jon Bass and Nick Kroll) through initial losses at the county and state levels, and a historic, unanimous ruling from the Supreme Court (one which would later lead to the repeal of country-wide anti-miscegenation statutes).

Nichols also introduces some of his genre-honed craftsmanship into *Loving*, as in a tense, late-night drive to Virginia from D.C., where Richard and Mildred secretly return in order to give birth to their first child. The sequence lends a brief jolt of tantalizing suspense to what is more often a formally reserved film, one that otherwise benefits most from convincing moments of intimate, interpersonal drama from its actors. Edgerton and Negga in particular are able to shape the individuality of their characters with small differentiations in how each responds to the various trials they face together.

Richard is prone to nervousness and evinces a desire for privacy throughout the film. He's worried that even the good publicity his case gets from media outlets like *Life* magazine can threaten his family, and frustrated that his efforts alone aren't enough to protect them. Negga emphasizes Mildred's dignified strength and resilience, and the spark of excitement she gets out of being a part of the civil rights movement. Both performances believably progress the story through years of a marriage, and if the film never really allows any serious tension between Richard and Mildred, the actors stake out scenes to show how their characters' differences in opinion could have caused some distance between them over a long period of time.

This will rent as well as **SOUTHSIDE WITH YOU, EQUITY, LOVE & FRIENDSHIP, and THE PERFECT MATCH.**





2/7 1 **TROLLS** ANIMATED FAMILY
\$142 MILL BO 2967 SCREENS **PG** 82 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

VOICES OF Anna Kendrick, Justin Timberlake, Zoey Deschanel

Based on the hugely popular line of dolls created by Danish woodcarver Thomas Dam, *Trolls* opens with some ersatz mythology for these creatures. The trolls were once cultivated as a delicacy for the Bergens, a race of much larger, ogreish beings who associate eating trolls with true happiness.

Led by King Peppy (voiced by Jeffrey Tambor), the trolls escaped to a new forest home where they now live almost oppressively happy lives of constant singing, dancing, and hugging. (They wear wrist pieces that ding every hour to remind them to hug each other, a detail which suggests the trolls' relentless positivity may be a kind of community-enforced mandate, a thematically tantalizing suggestion that the film, unsurprisingly, doesn't interrogate.)

Only the sullen and perpetually fearful Branch (Justin Timberlake) is immune to his people's sprightly optimism, and thus only he has made preparations for the possible return of the Bergens. So naturally, as per the dictates of kiddie-movie plotting, when one of the Bergens (Christine Baranski) finds the trolls' hideout and makes off with a group of them, he's forced to pair up with Princess Poppy (Anna Kendrick), the peppiest troll of them all, to journey to the land of the Bergens and rescue their companions.



The film proceeds as a kind of Kidz Bop jukebox musical, with the celebrity voice cast belting out peppy pop hits like Junior Senior's "Move Your Feet," Diana Ross's "I'm Coming Out," and "Can't Stop the Feeling!," which was written specifically for the film by Timberlake, his bid for "Happy"-style ubiquity. These play out as whizzy little music videos, brief diversions from the narrative to help keep the kids transfixed and maybe get them up and moving. But they're also showcases for some vividly fluid animation that, as in the elaborate dance sequences, are powered by swooping-diving camerawork and include blink-and-you'll-miss-'em visual gags.

Surely it's no animator's dream to work on a glitzy little speedball like *Trolls*, or to work for a company that suppresses animators' pay through an illegal wage-fixing cartel, for which DreamWorks recently offered a \$50 million settlement. But there are some beautiful moments here, such as a lovingly rendered piece of earthenware, or the film's intermittent detours into scrapbook-style animation. Even in a film as pre-assembled as *Trolls*, the animators have just enough space to create moments of genuine artistry.

This will rent as well as **STORKS, THE BFG, PETE'S DRAGON, MINIONS** and **INSIDE OUT**.



2/14 1 ARRIVAL SCI FI THRILLER
\$92 MILL BO 2895 SCREENS PG-13 116 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Amy Adams (BATMAN VS SUPERMAN, HER, AMERICAN HUSTLE, MAN OF STEEL)

Jeremy Renner (THE HURT LOCKER, CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR, MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ROUGE NATION, THE TOWN)

Forrest Whitaker (GOOD MORNING VIETNAM, TAKEN 3, SOUTHPAW, DOPE, OUT OF THE FURNACE, LES DANIELS' THE BUTLER)

Arrival, adapted from Ted Chiang's short story "Story of Your Life," is the most muted film that Villeneuve has made, as the methodical sci-fi narrative offers little in the way of the coiled tension so central to his overt thrillers, nor does it anchor itself to some cataclysmic tragedy (like *Polytechnique*, the director's little-seen film about the École Polytechnique massacre). Instead, what animates *Arrival* is its intuitive formalism—its translation of Chiang's sneakily involving prose into an equivalent visual analogue.

The film's plot is structured as a practical procedural: Following the sudden landing of 12 alien spacecrafts across the planet, linguistics professor Louise Banks (Amy Adams) and mathematician Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) are recruited to work as partners in a translation effort to engage with the aliens within the craft that hovers above a patch of rural Montana and make sense of their communications via data analysis. Villeneuve sees the relative inaction of this scenario as an opportunity to apply his aesthetic—one that works to actively influence the textual reading of the material—in a way uncomplicated by his usual propensity for genre tropes.

The director primarily emphasizes the depth of his film's visual field: In one sequence, an aircraft appears first as a tiny blip in a window framing the night sky, slowly coming to dominate the entirety of the space; in another, inside the oblong-shaped alien vessel that arrives in Montana, an undefined source of light beams at the far end of a darkened passageway. Villeneuve uses deliberate distance—an impermeable barrier separates Banks and Donnelly from the aliens they wish to communicate with—to suggest something that could eventually be accessible but only beyond our current vantage, and to symbolize a gradual arrival at a point of understanding.

This aesthetic has a very significant precedent: the film's source material. Chiang's "Story of Your Life" is essentially a meta narrative in which the academic language of the text necessitates

an active engagement with the subject of linguistics—an effort that's needed to comprehend a story which is very much *about* the powerful implications of linguistic comprehension. Villeneuve takes that layer of self-awareness and finds another function: His searching images counterpoint the hyper-articulate methodology of Banks and Donnelly with a sense of imbalance and uncertainty.

At its best, *Arrival* conjures the thrill of simultaneously learning and discovering that the thing learned has raised myriad new questions, and it does so in a way that's more emotionally engaging than it often is through Chiang's more clinical telling of this story. But there are some aspects of "Story of Your Life" that simply make more sense on the page, including an important detail of the chronology, which is



disclosed—unfussily, and early on—in Chiang’s text with a simple choice of grammatical tense but which is played, perplexingly, as a twist in this adaptation.

Because Chiang’s short story is so rooted in the minutiae of its language, largely depriving it of a narration, and of internal monologues, leaves a certain void that’s never quite compensated for. With ample space to fill in adapting this short story, Villeneuve and screenwriter Eric Heisserer have opted to pad out the back half of *Arrival* with a few inconsequential set pieces and an exaggeration of the original story’s intimate pseudo-science conceit into a plausibility-stretching global phenomenon.

Ultimately though, the limitations of this film may just be inherited from its source. Villeneuve proves just as capable of posing the big questions of life and language that made Chiang’s story so compelling—and he finds his own formal aesthetic to intensify those core themes in a cinematic way. But as with “Story of Your Life,” *Arrival* has difficulty transcending its calculated meld of form and content, never quite convincingly extending the implications of its sci-fi philosophy outside its own hermetic context.

This will rent as well as **SULLY**, **STAR TREK: BEYOND**, **GHOSHBUSTERS**, **X-MEN: APOCALYPSE**, and **MONEY MONSTER**.



2/14 3 **BLEED FOR THIS** DRAMA
\$7 MILL BO 437 SCREENS R 127 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Miles Teller (ALLEGIANT, WAR DOGS, GET A JOB, FANTASTIC FOUR, INSURGENT)

Aaron Eckhart (SULLY, LONDON HAS FALLEN, MY ALL-AMERICAN, OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN)

To understand the queasiness at the heart of *Bleed for This*, it’s worth starting with its final scene. Like *Creed*, Ben Younger’s film ends not with the usual rah-rah triumph (that occurs one scene earlier), but with a quieter, more reflective epilogue. In this case, it’s an interview that middleweight boxer Vinny Paziienza (Miles Teller) gives to a reporter in which he’s asked about the biggest lie he was told throughout his astonishing recovery process after a debilitating car accident. His response: “It’s not that simple,” referring to how everyone—doctors, his family, and his alcoholic coach, Kevin (Aaron Eckhart)—told him his potentially paralyzing injuries were impossible to recover from. When asked to elaborate, he continues, “Actually, it is that simple.”

Younger stages this would-be epiphany with nary a hint of ambiguity—certainly no acknowledgment that, unlike other working-class people like Paziienza, the boxer was privileged enough to have a network of people willing to support him financially and emotionally, thus making it easy for him to approach his rehabilitation from his broken neck in such a totally uncomplicated way. Whether one concludes that Younger himself actually believes in the simplistic worldview Paziienza articulates in that last scene depends on what you believe his attitude toward the man himself is—specifically, the competitive machismo he exhibits throughout the film.

Much of the film’s opening half-hour is devoted to meticulously detailing Paziienza’s macho side, an emphasis on character that throws a marginally subversive light onto the sports-movie conventions that the film fully embraces. Paziienza’s desire to defy the odds after his car accident leaves him in jeopardy of never walking again, much less fight, is depicted as part and parcel of his overriding need to win at all costs. He’s even willing to endure agonizing pain in order to get back into the ring, to the point that he chooses to forgo anesthetics when it’s time for him to take out the screws driven into his forehead that keeps his halo—the metal brace that holds his neck and spine in place after



surgery—in place. In scenes like this, Younger’s filmmaking exudes a kind of anthropological fascination (his use of handheld camera gives the film a sharply naturalistic feel), thus allowing us to determine for ourselves whether to find his masochistic tendencies heroic or not.

This should do as well or close to it as did **CREED, HANDS OF STONE, RACE, SNOWDEN, and HELL OF HIGH WATER.**



2/14 2 THE EDGE OF SEVENTEEN DRAMA
\$13 MILL BO 1956 SCREENS R 104 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Hailee Steinfeld (BARELY LETHAL, PITCH PERFECT 2, THE KEEPING ROOM, 3 DAYS TO KILL, ENDERS GAME)

The closest antecedents to Nadine (Hailee Steinfeld), the narcissistic heart of *The Edge of Seventeen*, are the more acerbic heroines of the high school film canon, like Ellen Page’s Juno MacGuff from *Juno* and Thora Birch’s Enid from *Ghost World*. Nadine’s vintage-tinged style is *Rookie*-certified and her wit is a little too lacerating. She isn’t as ostentatiously “weird” as her forebears, but Nadine is content to feel hopelessly out of step with the petty modern world instead of trying to figure out where she fits into it. The smartest thing about Kelly Fremon Craig’s teen dramedy is its measured take on Nadine’s theatrics. When the girl confides to her teacher, Mr. Bruner (Woody Harrelson), that she’s the quintessential “old soul,” all he can do is laugh.

In the film’s first scene, Nadine approaches Mr. Bruner in the throes of teenage angst, threatening suicide and lobbing verbal grenades after she catches her only friend, Krista (Haley Lu Richardson), in bed with her brother, Darien (Blake Jenner). Nadine’s histrionics suggest this is just the latest in a series of earthshaking adolescent tragedies, but Craig turns the screws on the viewer, revealing (via flashback) the death of the teen’s father, Tom (Eric Keenleyside), three years earlier. From here on, Nadine’s more petty frustrations are shaded with bottled-up grief.

Nadine lives in a tidy home with a self-involved mother, Mona (Kyra Sedgwick), and all-American boy Darien, whose “winner” mentality and mama’s-boy politeness Nadine perceives as both a denial of life’s awfulness and an act of hostility toward her own insecurity and self-loathing. Suddenly friendless, Nadine awkwardly invites the company of male classmates, fielding adorably stuttering advances from classmate Erwin (Hayden Szeto) while pining for Nick (Alexander Calvert), a brooding loser fresh out of juvie.



None of *The Edge of Seventeen*’s subplots are particularly original, but they’re deftly structured as a constellation of feuds, concerns, and anxieties Nadine must grapple with simultaneously. In her adolescent fervor, the teen says nasty things and makes a few predictably foolish decisions, but the film maintains an innate sympathy for her, and it’s full of shrewd reminders that Nadine’s sense of alienation is self-fulfilling. Craig uses the film’s homogeneous, upper-middle-class backdrop as a reminder of the girl’s innate security; even when they’re enraged by Nadine’s behavior, the supporting characters serve a similar function. (One scene shows Mona crafting a text message to her daughter, wavering between fury and maternal concern.)

The film doesn’t coddle Nadine, but it never hides its desire to nurture her. After Nadine storms away from scene after scene in a fit of frustration, Craig always cuts back to the victim of her impetuous scorn, registering looks that are wounded but distinctly empathetic. The film’s fixation on the messiness of

human communication pays a fine tribute to the canon of its producer, James L. Brooks. “I want to make you feel better,” Mona says helplessly at one point. “What can I say to do that?” Though Nadine flirts with Hannah Horvath-like levels of self-sabotage, Steinfeld does an excellent job maintaining her character’s innate appeal and dignity. At a party with her boyfriend and her ex-bestie, Nadine retreats to the bathroom and looks in the mirror and gives herself a motivational speech: “Don’t be so weird. Go talk to people.”

Nadine projects an intelligence and a charisma that her emotions can’t yet catch up with, and this dilemma—our capacity to reckon thoughts and feelings or, more simply, to become mature—propels every strand of the film. Craig’s script is notably free of references to cliques and stereotypical authority figures, and nods toward social media and teen sex and alcohol use are exceedingly casual. (Even the soundtrack, ranging from Beck and Aimee Mann to Caribou and Anderson .Paak, feels plausibly diverse without being erratic.) Everyone here is a work in progress; the film’s resolution is merely an acknowledgement of this fact. Though it goes through some familiar motions, *The Edge of Seventeen*’s devotion to the interior lives of its characters affords this high school comedy an unusual authenticity.

This will rent as well as **LOVE & FRIENDSHIP, A BIGGER SPLASH, FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS, and MISS YOU ALREADY.**



2/21 1 ALLIED DRAMA
\$42 MILL BO 2187 SCREENS R 124 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Brad Pitt (WORLD WAR Z, KILLING THEM SOFTLY, 12 YEARS A SLAVE, THELMA AND LOUISE, FURY)

Robert Zemeckis’s *Allied* takes a pulpy premise, the possibility that a WWII-era spy might have to kill his wife for being a double agent, and attempts to mine anguished melodrama from it. Canadian intelligence officer Max Vatan (Brad Pitt) meets French agent Marianne Beausejour (Marion Cotillard) on assignment in Vichy-controlled Morocco, where their cover as husband and wife blossoms into real romance amid plans to assassinate a Nazi governor.

This comical setup is played with an entirely straight face, and the filmmakers patiently home in on the manner in which Max and Marianne turn to the other out of battle-scarred weariness as much as desire.

The patience with which the screenplay by Steven Knight builds the couple’s romance adds extra gravity to the eventual revelation that Marianne may be a mole. That protocol demands Max must eliminate his wife should she prove guilty exacerbates the despair and disbelief that immediately overwhelms him. Seeking any reassurance that this is all just some elaborate game meant to test his loyalty, Max finds no solace in his otherwise affable commanding officer, Frank Heslop (Jared Harris), whose friendly personality turns to ice when Max attempts to coax any information from him.

Pitt evinces a melancholia practically unseen in his career as we’re treated to scenes of Max’s unsettling professional ability in his swift and uncaring murders and skirmishes. But his exploitation of existing networks to try and find any way to clear his wife are tragic, and in several scenes the man looks on the verge of tears as he pleads with other spies to corroborate her innocence. Cotillard, too, is captivating, lacing even her character’s warmest of smiles with ambiguous menace. Marianne knows something is wrong; the only question is whether she knows why Max is acting the way that he does. Throughout *Allied*, director Robert Zemeckis brings to bear his pop-epic scope in what’s otherwise a claustrophobic story.

Zemeckis brings to bear his pop-epic scope in what’s otherwise a claustrophobic story. The first scene, of Max parachuting gently into the Moroccan desert to be met on a sand road by a cab, uses large-scale filmmaking to forecast the more intimate mood of alienation and secrecy. Furthermore, Max and Marianne’s carefully planned assassination of the Nazi governor is like a one-act short film unto itself,

a procedural that shows off the extent of the agents' background research for their covers, their multiple-contingency strategy, and their quick-thinking wits.

When the two first make love, they do so while trapped in their car as a sandstorm rages around them, and Zemeckis drops the music from the soundtrack so as foreground the crescendoing roar of the tempest. *Allied's* best scene sets Max's dilemma against the ongoing conflagration of the Luftwaffe's bombing of London. The filmmakers capture the national sense of determination to keep up a normal life,



particularly in a sequence where Marianne throws a party that's disrupted first by Max nakedly pursuing those he thinks might be Gestapo contacts and then by a sudden burst of anti-aircraft fire that envelops the neighborhood as bombers appear overhead.

This will rent as well as **THE ACCOUNTANT, THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN, DEEPWATER HORIZON, and SULLY.**



2/21 2 BAD SANTA 2 COMEDY
\$17 MILL BO 2125 SCREENS R 92 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Billy Bob Thornton (TV---FARGO, GOLIATH---FILM---BAD SANTA, THE INFORMERS, THE SMELL OF SUCCESS, BAD NEWS BEARS, ICE HARVEST, ARMAGEDDON, TOMBSTONE)

Kathy Bates (MISERY, MIDNIGHT IN PARIS, THE GOLDEN COMPASS, P.S. I LOVE YOU)

Even at its most vulgar and juvenile, *Bad Santa 2* captures our cultural moment's zeitgeist of fear, anger, and loathing. The film recognizes the greed and consumerism that underlines Christmas in America, using its surface nihilism to lull the audience into a sense of cynical immunity to the usual Christmas banalities before revealing its true message: that blue-collar ne'er-do-wells on the margins of society are very much capable of grace.

Mark Waters's sequel to *Bad Santa* commences with Willie Soke (Billy Bob Thornton) back at rock-bottom, with only his idolatrous friend, Thurman Merman (Brett Kelly), by his side. The curly haired Thurman, still overweight and convinced that Willie is Santa Claus, is a man-child with the crystalline singing voice of a prepubescent boy and the softheaded naïveté of a shut-in. They're lured into another burglary scheme by Willie's erstwhile accomplice, Marcus (Tony Cox), and estranged mother, Sunny (Kathy Bates), a seasoned criminal who introduced Willie to a life of crime before abandoning him. Together they make up an alternative family even more blasphemous than the one depicted in Terry Zwigoff's original film, suggesting caricatures of the figures commonly associated with nativity scenes and Claus's workshop.

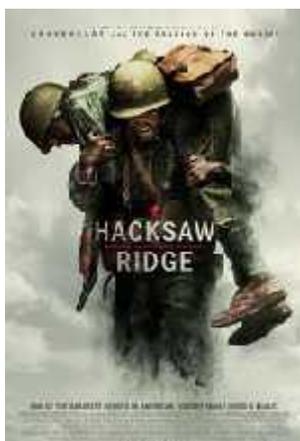
Bad Santa 2 treats its have-nots like flesh-and-blood humans—which is to say, neither as angels nor demons, as they're often portrayed in holiday films. They sin and are sinned against, driven by a desire to sate their basest urges and gnawed by a sense of duty to their higher instincts. The filmmakers focus on Willie's lust for sex and booze not to create a vicarious thrill for the audience, but to reveal his soul's emptiness and the fear of human connection that drives him toward self-destruction. Like Willy Loman, he's an everyman, no better or worse than any other, using his dreams to buttress the growing failure of his life, which threatens to consume him at every moment.

Throughout, Thornton's lean yet saggy body and weather-beaten smile endow Willie with the perfect combination of charming goodwill and cutthroat self-interest. Sunny, meanwhile, suggests a weird combination of the Madonna, Mrs. Claus, and a Hell's Angel. Bates's performance, carefully calibrated between vulgarity and pathos, brings great depth to this tattooed fury with a butch crew cut—a rough exterior that hides a wellspring of suffering. Sunny's failing health over the course of the film makes her seem like she's taking the sins of humanity upon her shoulders, which gives a striking and unusual tragic dimension to a film filled with wall-to-wall sex jokes.

Both a potent rendering of and cure for the holiday blues, *Bad Santa 2* shows that even the most hopeless situations can be remedied and that just about anyone is capable of redemption. Most remarkable is how true it remains to its politically incorrect sense of humor, refusing to temper its crude realism for fear of giving offense, all while creating a sense of total inclusion in its vision of redemption, where all are welcome, regardless of their class, race, or stature. Willie, an incorrigible yet ultimately softhearted dirt bag, is a universal scapegoat, and his salvation provides hope for us all.



This will rent as well as **BAD SANTA, MOTHER'S DAY, NEIGHBORS 2, BRIDGET JONESES BABY, BAD MOMS, and the HOLLARS.**



2/21 1 HACKSAW RIDGE ACTION
\$61 MILL BO 2378 SCREENS R 139 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Andrew Garfield (99 HOMES, THE AMAZING SPIDERMAN 2, THE SOCIAL NETWORK, NEVER LET ME GO)
Sam Worthington (EVEREST, SABOTAGE, AVATAR, DRIFT, THE GIFT)

Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge* is a story of devotion and sacrifice distracted by stretches of visceral explosions and grisly bloodletting. In other words, it's a film better-suited to Gibson's proven taste for gnarly, populist piety than the likes of *Braveheart* and *The Passion of the Christ*. In relating the story of WWII army corporal and combat medic Desmond Doss, the first "conscientious objector" to earn a Medal of Honor, Gibson takes evident pleasure in flouting the seeming contradictions at the heart of the material, delivering a fetishistically violent film that also happens to be a biopic about a Seventh-day Adventist who saved dozens of lives while refusing to touch a weapon.

The film's balletic opening battle scene—a small pageant of falling bodies, flamethrowers, and grenade blasts—is an amuse-bouche for the carnage to come, but even when *Hacksaw Ridge* retreats to the pre-war idyll of the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1929, blood and violence are still integral to the drama. Desmond is startled into his breed of solitary nonviolence as a child (played by Darcy Bryce), when a bit of roughhousing with brother Hal (Roman Guerriero) nearly turns deadly. After the incident, Desmond stares at a poster listing the Ten Commandments, dwelling on the sixth one as he overhears his aggrieved alcoholic father, Tom (Hugo Weaving), and tremulous mother, Bertha (Rachel Griffiths), fight through the night.

Hacksaw Ridge doesn't scrutinize these formative scars, but in the film's defense, it doesn't appear that Desmond does either. Portrayed as an adult by Andrew Garfield with an on-brand sincerity and a guilelessness that verges on Gumpian, Desmond spends each of the film's three acts pursuing and

achieving an explicit goal with unwavering faith in his ultimate success. This is a work of defiantly simplistic, classically structured Hollywood storytelling, and Gibson takes to its hokey plot points with some gusto, quickly ushering Desmond from his successful wooing of kind and uncomplicated nurse Dorothy (Teresa Palmer) to a stint in basic training, where Vince Vaughn tries mightily to reinvigorate the trope of the drill sergeant as insult comic.

Eventually, Desmond's religious beliefs stoke dissension among his peers, not to mention a wealth of bureaucratic confusion. The private won't work on Saturday (his Sabbath), and his refusal to bear arms means he can't properly complete basic training. Military hearings and a string of beatings by fellow soldiers ensue, and while Desmond ultimately makes it to the Pacific front as a combat medic, the film's screenplay never satisfactorily explains why Desmond feels called to join the fight in the first place. Desmond is committed to nonviolence, but it seems wrong to call him a pacifist, as he suffers no compunctions about being thrust into one of the bloodiest American operations of World War II. Gibson seizes on this irony without ever making an attempt to make sense of it. As such, the film's foray into moral anguish and courtroom drama is repetitive and willfully superficial. Desmond is taunted by soldiers and army brass asking him, "What're you gonna do, hit 'em with your Bible?" while Desmond finds innumerable ways to reassert both the fact of his faith and the depths of his patriotism. There's no questioning whether or not those tenets are compatible.

Though *Hacksaw Ridge* feels fundamentally disingenuous, Gibson takes full advantage of Desmond's highly individualistic worldview, exploiting the character's naif-like simplicity to deliver action that's at once gross, rousingly virtuosic, and implicitly endorsed by its messianistic hero. Desmond's acts of bravery take place in the thick of a Boschian hellscape: He never flinches at the heaps of intestines or the twirling, immolated soldiers that surround him, nor does he falter in his fervor to save every possible life. The film's Japanese enemies are little more than savage others, visually analogous to the swarms of rats we see feasting on corpses. Desmond saves a few injured Japanese soldiers, but he briefly gets to play the ass-kicker too, swatting away grenades with a hand and a foot in one single shot. Most of his heroics, though, are depicted with stoicism and a wealth of religious iconography.

The eponymous 350-foot high ridge itself is a resonant image of Desmond's ascension, and Gibson finds more opportunities to place him in baptismal and Christ-like poses. It's all deeply silly and occasionally risible, but it's also undeniably canny, a throwback entertainment that somehow successfully integrates a lofty sense of piety with an unyielding taste for bloodlust.

This will be as big as **JASON BOURNE, SULLY, BEN HUR, SUICIDE SQUAD** and **WAR DOGS**.





2/21 2 MANCHESTER BY THE SEA DRAMA
\$11 MILL BO 1679 SCREENS R 137 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Casey Affleck (THE FINEST HOURS, TRIPLE 9, INTERSTELLAR, OUT OF THE FURNACE)

Michelle Williams (OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL, SHUTTER ISLAND, MY WEEK WITH MARILYN, BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN)

Kyle Chandler (TV—FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS, BLOODLINE--- FILM—ZERO DARK THIRTY, ARGO, BROKEN CITY)

Quaint and picturesque, Manchester looks like a prison to Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck), a handyman based in the Boston suburb of Quincy. Lee's profession suits his transient nature; his days are a series of fleeting transactions, repairing people's leaks and clogged toilets, before nights spent drinking alone in bars or watching sports in a drab basement apartment. He's evidently withdrawn and disengaged, keen to avoid niceties and companionship. Lee is called to return to Manchester after his older brother, Joe (Kyle Chandler), dies of a heart attack, the end result of years of congestive heart failure. From bureaucratic dealings to uncomfortable reunions with old friends and family, Joe's death forces Lee to reintegrate into a society he's turned away from after an unspeakable tragedy. Lee struggles to navigate through these rituals, but his grasp on his grief is truly shaken by the news that he's been deemed the legal guardian of Joe's teenage son, the popular and athletic ladies' man Patrick (Lucas Hedges).



Lonergan is keen to frustrate the therapeutic trajectory of *Manchester by the Sea's* premise. Lee and Patrick are united in tactics of avoidance: Lee trots Patrick along to appointments with lawyers, mechanics, and funeral directors, deflecting long-term decisions—about guardianship and estate plans—in favor of dealing with immediate, bureaucratic concerns. Patrick, meanwhile, has Lee chauffeur him to band practices and between dates with his multiple girlfriends. Lonergan fleshes out the history of their family through a series of slipstream flashbacks. Some consecrate the bond between Lee, Joe, and a young Patrick (Ben O'Brien), while others slowly illuminate earlier devastations, like the alcoholism of Patrick's mother, Elise (Gretchen Mol), and the wife, Randi (Michelle Williams), and family who've disappeared from Lee's life. These memories, all tender and some utterly wrenching, steadily accumulate as the Manchester winter slowly thaws into spring.

The film gradually comes to its sense of exquisitely calibrated, hardened intimacy. Every flashback and uncomfortable reunion draws out another vagary of the mourning process, and *Manchester by the Sea* comes to incorporate a full community of souls, and their attempts to communicate their wounds and regrets to one another. Some reach out, others withdraw, and the rest aren't sure what to do but crack jokes and conjure better times. And this comprehensive emotional sweep is achieved with minimal exposition: Lee is revealed to be somewhat of a local pariah without any catty scenes of small-town gossip, and details about the dissolution of his marriage are withheld simply because they're abundantly clear on the alternately desolate and anguished faces of Affleck and Williams. Lee and Randi's exchanges, a symphony of agonizingly incomplete thoughts and gestures, serve as the film's emotional sledgehammer.

Manchester by the Sea's heart, though, rests in the relationship between Lee, the would-be guardian who can't escape his self-abnegating sadness, and Patrick, the orphaned son who doesn't know how to accept that his perfectly normal life has taken an abrupt turn. Their testy interactions result in some of Lonergan's most full-hearted comedy—indelible bickering about teen sex, and a conversation

where both characters refer to a garage door opener as a “bleeper” that any New Englander will cherish—and his most despairing sentiments. *Manchester by the Sea* insists on the intractability of grief even as it implicitly argues that we have a social responsibility to take care of one another. Dead and distant family members, the film’s omnipresent structuring absences, only exacerbate these burdens. As such, Affleck, Hedges, and every member of Lonergan’s impeccable cast comes off as a human being in pain just doing their best, in the full awareness that it won’t be enough to heal, appease, or fix the only people they have left to love.

A good renter like **SNOWDEN, FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS, HELL OR HIGH WATER, OUR KIND OF TRAITOR, NOW YOU SEE ME 2, EYE IN THE SKY and JOY.**



2/28 1 DOCTOR STRANGE ACTION/ADVENTURE
\$225 MILL BO 4267 SCREENS PG-13 115 MINUTES

Benedict Cumberbatch (ZOO LANDER 2, BLACK MASS, THE FIFTH ESTATE, THE IMITATION GAME, 12 YEARS A SLAVE)
Rachel McAdams (ALOHA, SOUTH PAW, EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE, MIDNIGHT IN PARIS, SHERLOCK HOLMES)

The opening scene, with its colossal scale and endless moving parts, employs the kind of outré visualization usually reserved for Marvel’s climaxes.

Soon after, the action shifts to Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch), a preternaturally gifted neurosurgeon whose skills are exceeded only by his ego. Shaming his colleagues for their inferior diagnoses, shunning the gratitude of his patients’ families, Strange appears to care only for the proof of his own genius and the luxury it buys him. His fast living catches up to him, though, when he sends his sports car careening off a mountain road and ruins his hands. Desperately seeking a way to repair his nerves, Strange eventually makes his way to Nepal and into the order of sorcerers led by the Ancient One (Tilda Swinton). The sage quickly tears apart Strange’s scientific rationality by thrusting him into the astral plane, projecting him into a kaleidoscopic multiverse that undulates and glows and warps around him (and even distorts his own body). Strange, to his credit, takes this mind-melting revelation in stride, collecting his breath and saying only “teach me.”

The film’s foregrounded morality constantly pulls focus on Strange’s reactions to being thrust into a war waged between the Ancient One and a rogue pupil, Kaecilius (Mads Mikkelsen), who’s given into the dark impulses of magic and seeks to serve a colossal, planet-devouring immortal called Dormammu. Strange’s aversion to this fight is complicated, a combination of cowardice, self-consciousness, and a genuine doctor’s revulsion of doing harm instead of preventing it. That these elements intersect, with the surgeon perhaps leaning on the Hippocratic oath to mask his fear, only further shades in the character. Strange’s mentor and companion, Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), provides a foil that clarifies the protagonist’s mutability, contrasting moral flux and uncertainty with the rigid form of a total believer whose unyielding nature has as many drawbacks as boons. In some ways, Strange is, in his first MCU appearance, given to the kind of self-reflection and doubt that the A-list heroes have only managed to scrape together over multiple films.

The character of Christine Palmer (Rachel McAdams) largely exists as window dressing, to provide a generic love interest for the story’s hero, and the script relies aggressively on smug, reference-heavy humor to pad out its dialogue. The latter becomes such a bore that the only good joke in the film comes at the expense of all the



other ones, when Strange mutters, "People used to think that I was funny," to the unsmiling mystical librarian Wong (Benedict Wong), who swiftly responds, "Did they work for you?"

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This will be as big a renter as was **CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR, SUICIDE SQUAD, STAR TREK: BEYOND, INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE, and X MEN: APOCALYPSE.**



2/28 3 MOONLIGHT DRAMA
\$10 MILL BO 1436 SCREENS R 131 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

**Mahershala Ali (TV---HOUSE OF CARDS, TREME---FILM---THE HUNGER GAMES I & II, SUPREMECY, GO FOR SISTERS, THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES)
Sharriff Earp (FILM DEBUT)**

The best scene in Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* is also its longest. It depicts two men who, in their boyhood days, shared both a sexual experience and a violent episode and meet again after years apart at a close-to-empty diner, hesitantly exchanging information about the lives they've lived in the interim. Chiron (Trevante Rhodes) grits through his grillz that, after a stint in juvenile detention, he's "trappin'"; Kevin (André Holland) talks of a marriage, kids, and an amiable divorce. Throughout, Jenkins negotiates a hybrid of the patient, real-time conversational moments recognizable in Andrew Haigh and Richard Linklater's films, and the aesthetic sensualism favored by Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodóvar. It's the one occasion here that Jenkins gets that balance just right, allowing for both an interpersonal intimacy with his characters and a sensory understanding of their unspoken desires.

Collectively, these scenes register as histrionic because there are only broad strokes to contextualize them. At one point, a neighborhood drug dealer, Juan (Mahershala Ali), who comes to mentor a young Chiron (Alex Hibbert) imparts words of wisdom to the boy, but scenes later he's gone, and precisely what his interest was



in Chiron is left unclear. Likewise, the principal characters—from Chiron's mother to Chiron himself—are defined almost exclusively by their roles in conflicts and reconciliations. Harris in particular has to somehow create a believable arc from Paula's repeated, drug-addled berating and one late scene that depicts the mother soberly crying as she expresses her remorse. Chiron, meanwhile, is never, at least until the last section of the film, much more than the sum of his interactions with other people.

What tends to right *Moonlight*, even when Jenkins's filmmaking drifts into indulgence, is the strength of its performers. Sanders and Roades's Chirons in particular bring so much nuance to a part that would seem to have little inherently built into it; both actors develop shades of introversion and reflexively projected self-confidence to give the character a movingly damaged sense of black masculinity. All the actors here, in fact, leave lasting impressions, from Ali in his short time on screen, to singer Janelle Monáe, as a kind of second mother to Chiron. But it's Roades and Holland's final scenes as the adult Chiron and Kevin that seem to put Jenkins most in his element, allowing for the dynamic of two actors spending the time to really develop the relationship between their characters.

These scenes play very much like a more formally accomplished iteration of the walk-and-talk dialogues that made up Jenkins's last film, *Medicine for Melancholy*. And while there's a clear advancement in not only the filmmaking, but in the rhythms of the writing, between that 2008 debut and this long-awaited follow-up, *Moonlight* spans too broad a narrative to always capitalize on its director's facility for small-scale drama. Still, when the film does eventually settle into its sneakily moving final section—and the two-person drama format Jenkins first became known for—it excels with all the expectation of a filmmaker who's had nearly a decade to contemplate how he could do the last thing that he did even better.

The rentals on this will be like **THE PERFECT MATCH, SNOWDEN, THE INFILTRATOR, RACE, and TUMBLEDOWN.**



2/28 2 SHUT IN DRAMA

\$7 MILL BO 587 SCREENS PG-13 91 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Naomi Watts (THE BLEEDER, ALLEGIANT, THE SEA OF TREES, J. EDGAR, THE IMPOSSIBLE)

When you dedicate your life to helping others, and are unable to help your own son... What do you do? That's what this young family was trying to figure out. Their son needed more help than she could give and together they came up with a solution. Only, what they thought was a solution would create a [plethora](#) of problems. After everything, this young mother finds herself alone. A tragedy has taken all that she knew and loved away from her. The only way she is able to deal with the day to day is to throw herself into her work. Even though she does her best to help others, she realizes how helpless she is when she can no longer care for one that needs her the most. Shortly after she makes a life altering decision, she has the opportunity to meet a young boy. This young man reminds her of everything she has lost and as she begins to grow closer to him, something darker begins to present itself. Can she begin again or will the fear of what has happened / what could happen stop her in her tracks. A thought provoking thriller that is more disturbing than it lets on. It's a somewhat original story with obvious inspirations from certain [horror classics](#). Though the story leads into what you think you might expect, be prepared to expect something entirely different. Disturbingly perilous in its presentation, this plays on primal fears to express itself in a way that leaves you simply wanting more. Is that a good or a bad thing? You decide.

This will rent as well as **DENIAL, EQUITY, SNOWDEN, HELL OF HIGH WATER** and **OUR KIND OF TRAITOR**.

