

**1/1 A.X.L. FAMILY ADVENTURE**  
**\$8 MILL 1287 SCREENS PG 98 MINUTES**  
**DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO**

**Thomas Jane (HBO SERIES-HUNG--- FILM---STANDOFF, BEFORE I WAKE, HOT SUMMER NIGHTS, DRIVE HARD)**

A teenage Motocross racer finds an escaped robot dog that he bonds with and wants to keep from its owners, who are developing it to be an ultimate military killing machine. A-X-L is what you get if Number 5 from "Short Circuit" had been designed to look like a dog. This film is written and directed by Oliver Daly and serves as his feature film writing and directorial debut. The story revolves around

a young Motocross racer named Miles (Alex Neustaedter), who is an excellent racer despite that his team, which consists of him and his dad Chuck (Thomas Jane), have no money for parts or a better bike. Another racer named Sam (Alex MacNicoll), whose team has tons of money and opportunities, invites Miles to join them on an outing to the desert one day. Miles, Sam and his crew drive out to the middle of nowhere and sabotage Mile's bike, stranding him and forcing him to make it home on his own. In a nearby scrapyard, Miles finds a giant robotic dog called A-X-L. A-X-L has recently escaped from CRAINE Industries, who are developing what they hope will be the ultimate battle-ready war dog for the military. Miles sees that A-X-L is riddled with bullet holes and other damage, so he decides that its owners don't deserve their property back. However, CRAINE doesn't want to let their multi-million dollar piece of military hardware go without a fight, so they send out a security team to retrieve it.



If you've seen the trailer for "A-X-L," you may have guessed that it would be a generic action film meant for kids. You're not wrong. The plot is eerily similar to that of "Short Circuit," but with a dog-robot instead of a robot-robot. The tone, and our experience watching it, on the other hand, falls somewhere between that of "Monster Trucks" and "Max Steel." Much of the story focuses on a relationship between Miles and female lead Sara ("Power Rangers" star Becky G). The way A-X-L looks boasts a decent special effects job, but as a character, he is kind of weak considering he is supposed to be this hugely groundbreaking military weapon. A-X-L gets outmaneuvered by teenagers on multiple occasions and spends most its time running to avoid capture. Some war dog! It is clear to us that the filmmaker wants the audience to view A-X-L as if he were a normal canine as opposed to a military-made killing machine. We don't think this sentiment is achieved considering he nearly wastes a bunch of kids on multiple occasions. Our pug would never... right?



This will rent as well as **DARKEST MINDS, BLINDSPOTTING, ALPHA, ADRIFT and HOUSE WITH A CLOCK IN IT'S WALL.**



## 1/1 **BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE** MYSTERY/THRILLER

\$19 MILL BO 2158 SCREENS R 141 MINUTES  
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO  
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Jeff Bridges (CRAZY HEART, THE BIG LEBOWSKI, THE LAST PICTURE SHOW, SEA BISCUIT, THE CONTENDER, THE FISHER KING, STAR MAN, BACK DRAFT, CUTTER'S WAY)**

**Chris Hemsworth (THE HUNTSMAN: WINTERS WAR, VACATION, AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON, THOR: DARK WORLD, 12 STRONG)**

Set at a hotel that straddles the California-Nevada border, writer-director Drew Goddard's *Bad Times at the El Royale* immediately announces its obsession with duality. In 1969, the El Royale is a shadow of its former glory as a bustling gambling hub popular enough to be sung about by Dean Martin. Gambling is now outlawed on its premises, and the mostly vacant hotel is run almost single-handedly by a bumbling greenhorn, Miles (Lewis Pullman), who's obligated to tell everyone who walks through the door about its proud history and singular offering of rooms on both sides of the border. The kitschy appeal of the place may be gone, but someone, somewhere, seems very invested in Miles's gleeful act of keeping up appearances.

The El Royale stands as a character unto itself, a triumph of meticulous period detail from floor to ceiling, including a wondrous array of gaudy carpets and wallpaper, extravagant lobby fireplaces, vibrant neon signs, and a grandiose jukebox that pumps out the '50s and '60s R&B hits that largely make up the film's soundtrack. The pop-psychedelic spirit of the era is infused in every inch of the hotel, but you can also feel it depressingly fading. Indeed, this place almost seems preternaturally aware that the flower children are about to wilt under the dark and looming shadow of Nixonian paranoia.

Soon we learn of a secret corridor that runs along one side of the hotel, complete with two-way mirrors and optional speakers, meaning the El Royale is a playground for the voyeur—or anyone wanting to, say, blackmail high-level politicians who may have passed through and stayed in the area. While Miles eventually cops to the fact that "management" forces him to record certain guests, the film teases a conspiracy-fueled plot that ultimately never comes into complete focus. In one sense, it's a disappointment to see the film ultimately do so little with such a juicy storyline, but in eliding the more far-reaching scope and full-blown psychedelic paranoia of something like Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice*, Goddard is better able to milk some electric drama from the contradictions and complexities of his characters' beings.

As the film's camera follows numerous characters as they wander through the hotel's back corridor, often catching glimpses of things meant to remain behind closed doors, the audience begins to see these individuals in different lights. It's impressive to behold the ease with which Goddard takes to this thorny and prismatic view of his characters' troubled pasts and secret agendas, effectively forcing us to continually question the nature of our preconceptions. And the compositions throughout these scenes, some of which we view through reflective surfaces such as mirrors, work to further implicate us in the film's voyeuristic tendencies. That most of these sequences are set to Erivo's Darlene Sweet belting out doo-wop a cappella as she practices in her room only adds to their offbeat allure.

Soon after Chris Hemsworth's Billy Lee, a Manson-like hippie cult leader, shows up on the scene, guns a-blazin' and obliques a-poppin', he goes into a lengthy speech that literalizes the film's themes of duality and notions of right and wrong and good and evil, Goddard risks slipping into straight-up soapboxing. But Goddard still manages to even wind this one-note baddie toward a cutting scene that brings an unexpected emotional weight to his seemingly invincible megalomania. As the moment comes after Darlene, the victim of racist and





sexist harassment on several occasions, finally calls him on his bullshit—she dismissively declares, “I’m bored of men like you”—after he forces everyone to indulge in a series of power-grabbing mind games, we’re treated to one of the more subtle and unexpected nods to the dynamics of the #MeToo movement. And it’s in its ability to upend expectations, both in terms of narrative and depth of characters, that *Bad Times at the El Royale* overcomes the shortcomings of its sprawling, messy narrative.

This will as fun a renter as was **PEPPERMINT, BLACKKKLANSMAN, THE MEG, TRUTH OR DARE, THOROUGHBREDS, and THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING MO.**



**1/1 NIGHT SCHOOL COMEDY**  
\$73 MILL BO 2986 SCREENS **PG-13** 111 MINUTES  
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO  
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Kevin Hart (JUMANJI: WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE, RIDE ALONG 1 and 2, GET HARD, ABOUT LAST NIGHT, LITTLE FOCKERS)**

The story of a group of misfits who bond together while in an evening class studying to get their GEDs isn't funny enough to rate as a first class comedy.

The cast is hugely likable, yet their considerable comedic talents feel wasted. Tiffany Haddish is typecast once again as an obnoxious, wisecracking woman, and Kevin Hart gives the same rote performance that he's given in nearly every single film he's ever starred in. Supporting turns from Mary Lynn Rajsakub, Romany Malco, and Rob Riggle are entertaining, but at least 99% of their jokes fall flat. It's a real shame because the film's messages of never giving up and working hard to triumph over adversity are good life lessons.



The electric chemistry between Hart and Haddish never gets the spotlight it deserves. I'd love to see them make another, funnier film together because they are a joy to watch as they verbally spar back-and-forth. But if you go into this one expecting to be entertained, it delivers. Just don't count on too many laughs.

This will easily rent as well as **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, HOUSE 2, MAMMA MIA 2, UNCLE DREW, BLOCKERS, I FEEL PRETTY and FATHER FIGURES.**



**1/8 HELL FEST HORROR**  
**\$13 MILL BO 2297 SCREENS R 99 MINUTES**  
**DVD/BLU RAY---DIGITAL COPY WITH THE BLU RAY**

**Bex Taylor-Klaus (TV---VOLTRON, GLEE, ARROW, THE LIBRARIANS)**

A slash-orama set inside a horror-themed amusement park, “Hell Fest” scratches a horror fan’s itch to see a straight-up, R-rated throwback to the slasher pics of yore with a killer backdrop. Sharing a bare framework with 2014’s found-footage excursion “The Houses October Built” and the carnivalesque setting with Tobe Hooper’s underseen 1981 gem “The Funhouse,” the film seems like it could practically write itself but is resourcefully directed by Gregory Plotkin (2015’s “Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension”) and mixes a good-times vibe with taut, edgy tension. “Hell Fest” delivers exactly what it promises.

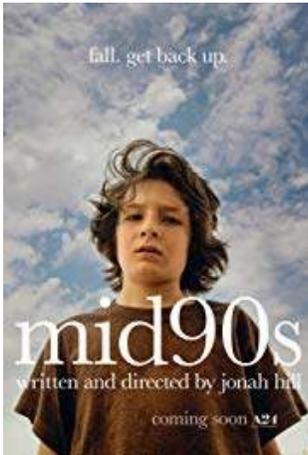
Reuniting with best friend Brooke (Reign Edwards) and roommate Taylor (Bex Taylor-Klaus), college student Natalie (Amy Forsyth) gets dragged to a traveling horror-themed haunt called Hell Fest on Halloween night. Joining them are Brooke’s boyfriend Quinn (Christian James), Taylor’s boyfriend Asher (Matt Mercurio), and Gavin (Roby Attal), Natalie’s crush who’s scored the group VIP wristbands to skip to the front of the lines. Even though horror isn’t Natalie’s cup of tea, she has fun getting spooked with Gavin and her friends. It’s all fun and games at first, until a man in a creepy flesh mask, who fits right in with the paid employees in the park, targets Natalie and begins following her around through each maze.

Playing by the slasher subgenre’s rules, “Hell Fest” still takes full advantage of its optimally creepy premise. As the viewer vicariously enters the funhouse atmosphere of Hell Fest with the characters, one is lulled into a false sense of security, as some of the dead bodies among the props could be real and one of the masked killers might be more than just a professional scarer taking his job seriously. The screenplay by Seth M. Sherwood (2017’s “Leatherface”), Blair Butler, and Akela Cooper is quite basic in terms of plot and victim-to-be character development, although the film moves at a good clip and the cast imbue their bare-bones roles with enough likable personality. Amy Forsyth (NBC’s “Rise”) makes for an appealing, relatable heroine as Nat, who figures out how to brave the mazes full of mannequins and real actors by looking at their hands and then later realizes the pattern of each maze and uses it to her advantage. She also shares a sweet, naturally awkward chemistry with Roby Attal as crush Gavin. Reign Edwards (FX’s “Snowfall”) lends spark and charisma as tough but quickly vulnerable Brooke, and Bex Taylor-Klaus (MTV’s “Scream”) makes a big impression, popping in every scene with a rambunctious energy as horror-obsessed Taylor. And horror icon Tony Todd, Candyman himself, is fun to spot in a cameo as Hell Fest’s carnival barker.



When it comes to a slasher movie, it’s a feature, not a bug, to watch a series of scenes with characters being stalked and killed. There are nasty, wince-inducing kills with a high-striker mallet and a non-prop syringe; a sequence involving a guillotine ratchets up the dread; and the climactic chase between the killer, Nat, and Brooke in the ultimate maze, known as Hell, makes clever use of each room, ending with one full of black-robed figures donning white masks. That the psychopath at hand comes with no true identity or motive is just as well because the truly unsettling final scene makes up for it, and there’s a leitmotif of the killer humming “Pop Goes the Weasel.” Atmospheric with a neon-colored aesthetic, the film oozes deliciously vibrant production design and creepy inspiration when the characters wander through each different maze. With the “Saw” and “Paranormal Activity” franchises fading away as the horror genre’s Halloween-released mainstays, “Hell Fest” offers a frightfully fun Halloween fix for fans of horror and amusement parks.

This will rent as well as **DARKEST MINDS, STRANGERS: PREY AT NIGHT, UNSANE, ANNIHILATION** and **INSIDIOUS: THE LAST KEY**.



## 1/8 MID90'S DRAMA

\$9 MILL 1206 SCREENS R 95 MINUTES DVD/BLU RAY  
DIGITAL COPY WITH THE BLU RAY

### **Sunny Suljic (DON'T WORRY HE WON'T GET FAR ON FOOT, THE KILLING OF A SACRED DEER, SUMMER OF 17)**

The realistic and raw "Mid90s," from first-time director Jonah Hill, rides the wave of coming-of-age insecurities with a hearty dose of skate culture nostalgia. This ode to adolescent angst would make an excellent companion piece to this year's "Eighth Grade," but with a distinctively male perspective. The mumblecore-style story and organic performances (from an outstanding supporting cast of non-actors) are both credible and sincere, and while there isn't a whole lot of

meaningful insight, there's something strikingly universal about the deep need for a sense of belonging in your own little corner of society.

Thirteen year old Stevie (Sunny Suljic) struggles to cope with life in 90s-era Los Angeles. He spends his summer navigating between a troubled home environment (including regular beat-downs from his physically abusive older brother Ian (Lucas Hedges) and a boyfriend-hopping, absent mom (Katherine Waterston)), and a group of new hooligan friends (Na-kel Smith, Olan Prenatt, Gio Galicia, and Ryder McLaughlin) that he meets at a local skateboard shop.



Eager to please and desperate to fit in with these older, troubled boys, Stevie begins to venture down a dangerous path of underage drinking, illegal drugs, wild parties, and "hanging out." Their bad influence encourages Stevie to become reckless in all aspects of his life, much to the dismay of his brother and mother.

The film is punctuated with deeper, serious undertones about class, race, and gender, but it never feels heavy-handed nor stereotypical. The mindless discussions about nothing are as engaging as they are offensive (Hill, who also wrote the screenplay, nails the off-color dialogue of a group of 17 year olds), and you'll feel like a part of the gang. These outsiders form a surrogate family, even if they seem like unproductive castoffs to the rest of the community.

The hits of nostalgia come fast and furious in the opening scenes of the film but thankfully that tapers off in favor of a more personal story. But for every "Beavis and Butthead" reference, there's a glimmer of gold (with most of the spark coming from brutally honest scenes of friendship and the emotional punch of dysfunctional familial relationships).

This will rent as well as **8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE, LEAVE NO TRACE, RIDER, TULLY, THOROUGHBREDS, and HEARTS BEAT LOUD.**



**1/15 FIRST MAN** DRAMA \$46 MILL BO  
2153 SCREENS **PG-13** 131  
MINUTES DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE  
COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Ryan Gosling (THE BIG SHORT, GANGSTER SQUAD, CRAZY STUPID LOVE, LA LA LAND, THE NICE GUYS and BLADE RUNNER 2049)**

Damien Chazelle sets his sights on a place at Hollywood's head table alongside Steven Spielberg and Christopher Nolan with this muscular biopic of unassailable American hero Neil Armstrong (Ryan Gosling). Based on the bestselling biography *First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong* by James R. Hansen, *First Man* spans much of the 1960s, charting Armstrong's journey from rookie NASA recruit to history-making moonwalker. The film hits the ground running with a stomach-churning test-flight sequence strikingly reminiscent of Nolan's *Dunkirk* in its wide-eyed admiration for real-world derring-do, its meticulous attention to period detail, and its flawless technical execution.

Moments of levity are handled more effectively. When Janet forces her husband to prepare their kids for the possibility that he won't return from space, the scene takes an unexpected comedic detour, with Armstrong lapsing into PR speak, addressing his young sons as if they were prying reporters. And Buzz Aldrin is portrayed by Corey Stoll as a swaggering hothead who seems to view the whole enterprise as a high-stakes dick-measuring contest. But such playful touches are few and far between, and fail to punctuate the overriding sense of dour earnestness that dominates the proceedings.



Perhaps *First Man's* most laudable achievement is its entirely un-jingoistic appraisal of the American space program, with a strong emphasis placed on both its economic and human cost. When Chazelle widens his focus, it's often to depict mounting public opposition to NASA's endeavors. Meanwhile, over the course of his training, Armstrong loses numerous friends and colleagues, under invariably harrowing circumstances: A sequence in which a trio of astronauts perish in a cabin fire serves up some of the film's most indelible imagery. And all of this casts a long, bittersweet shadow over *First Man's* visually mesmerizing final act: Chazelle is clearly in awe of the collective efforts it took to propel Armstrong to the moon, but he remains ambivalent about whether it was all ultimately worth such immense sacrifice.

This will rent as well as **ALPHA, MILE 22, THE MEG, SICARIO 2 and BLOCKERS.**



**1/15 GOOSEBUMPS 2 : HAUNTED HALLOWEEN**  
FAMILY \$48 MILL BO 3241 SCREENS PG  
90 MINUTES DVD/COMBO  
DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO

Goosebumps 2 picks up in the small town of Wardencllyffe, New York, as its residents prepare for the fast-approaching Halloween Night festivities. Meanwhile, in the Quinn household, high school senior Sarah (Madison Iseman) is trying to finish her college application and her younger brother Sonny (Jeremy Ray Taylor) is struggling with his science class project - a miniature replica of an experimental wireless transmission station in Wardencllyffe that was built and designed by Nikola Tesla, but never finished (aka. the Tesla Tower). The Quinns are joined by Sonny's best friend Sam Carter (Caleel Harris), who is staying over at their house while his parents are away for the Halloween holiday.

After some prodding from Sam, Sonny agrees to take a break from his project and clear out an abandoned local house, as part of the duo's ongoing efforts to launch a (successful) junk cleanup business. While there, however, the pair stumble upon an incomplete manuscript for a Goosebumps novel, unaware that the building was once owned by R.L. Stine himself. Not knowing any better, Sam and Sonny unlock the book and inadvertently unleash the Goosebumps villain Slappy the Dummy back into the real world. While the living ventriloquist dummy seems (sorta) friendly at first, it's not long before he reveals his true evil plan, with only Sam, Sonny and Sarah to stand in his way.

At the same time, Goosebumps 2 is perhaps more successful than its predecessor when it comes to being genuinely menacing and scary for the juice box crowd, yet still light-hearted enough to avoid traumatizing them (hence, "spooky"). Much of the credit for that goes to director Ari Sandel (The DUFF), who does a commendable job of combining suspenseful and creepy storytelling with comedic moments here, much like Stine did so well in his original Goosebumps novels. Haunted Halloween, as indicated earlier, feels like a lower-budgeted affair than the first Goosebumps, yet Sandel and his creative team - including, DP Barry Peterson (Game Night) and production designer Rusty Smith (Get Out) - still manage to deliver a movie that's a proper cut above a comparable TV film, in terms of overall craftsmanship.

This will rent as well as **TRANSYLVANIA 3**, **TEEN TITANS**, **PADDINGTON 2** and **CHRISTOPHER ROBIN**.





**1/15 HALLOWEEN (2018) HORROR**  
\$159 MILL BO 3892 SCREENS **R** 106 MINUTES  
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO  
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Jamie Lee Curtis (A FISH CALLED WANDA, TRUE LIES, HALLOWEEN (ORIGINAL), FIERCE CREATURES, FOREVER YOUNG, THE FOG, PROM NIGHT)**

*Halloween*, as indicated earlier, picks up in real-time, e.g. four decades after Michael murdered Laurie's friends and nearly killed her too, before he was arrested and taken into custody. The older Laurie still lives in Haddonfield, Illinois, but now resides in a heavily fortified and isolated house, where she spends most of her time preparing for Michael's return. Laurie's obsession with Michael has further cost her multiple marriages and alienated her from her adult daughter Karen (Judy Greer) and teen granddaughter Allyson (Andi Matichak), who are frustrated by her refusal to seek professional help and let go of the past.

Everything changes when Michael is transferred to a maximum security prison to spend the rest of his life, only for his bus to crash on the way over and "The Shape" to escape. Before long, Michael makes his way back to Haddonfield with his white mask in tow, just in time to carry out another murder spree on Halloween night. As the local police struggle to get a handle on the situation and the body count grows, it thus falls to the three generations of Strode women to stop Michael, once and for all.

*Halloween (2018)* could be described as the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* of *Halloween* sequels, in the sense that its narrative intentionally echoes that of the film that started the franchise, at the same time that it progresses its mythos and themes. The movie also boasts a distinctly offbeat sense of humor, thanks in no small amount to the script by director David Gordon Green and his *Vice Principals* collaborators Jeff Fradley and Danny McBride. Generally speaking, *Halloween's* comedy succeeds in giving it more personality and preventing it from becoming excessively downbeat and unpleasant, rather than undercutting the tension of its story. That ends up being quite important, seeing as the film is otherwise pretty grim in tone, even during the quieter scenes when Michael *isn't* on the loose and slaughtering people in cold blood.



It helps that *Halloween (2018)* is the first entry in the franchise to really explore how Laurie would have been impacted (psychologically and emotionally) by Michael's initial murders all those years ago. The film thusly offers Curtis a chance to really dig deep into the role and portray the character as a multifaceted protagonist who can go from being utterly fearless and determined to incredibly vulnerable and sensitive, depending on the circumstances. *Halloween* is still Laurie's story more than that of her family, but Greer and Matichak likewise shine here, especially in the scenes that highlight their characters' personal demons and how they ultimately stem from what Michael did. Supporting cast members like Will Patton as police officer Frank Hawkins and Haluk Bilginer as Dr. Ranbir Sartain (aka. "The New Dr. Loomis", as Laurie even calls him) also do fine work, but nevertheless play second fiddle to the Strode women in the film (and fittingly so).

This will be a huge renter just like **FIRST PURGE, ANT MAN AND THE WASP, JURASSIC WORLD, DEAD POOL 2, and A QUIET PLACE.**



**1/15 THE OLD MAN AND THE GUN DRAMA**  
**\$11 MILL BO 1487 SCREENS PG-13 93 MIN UTEs**  
**DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO**

**Robert Redford (BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S, SNEAKERS, THE WAY WE WERE, BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID, STING, THE HORSE WHISPERER, OUT OF AFRICA)**

The film tells the story of real-life career criminal Forrest Tucker (Redford), a senior citizen who spent a lifetime robbing banks and running from the authorities. Tucker escaped from San Quentin when he was 70 years old after an unprecedented string of heists that evaded authorities and enchanted the public. It's hard not to root for this character, especially when the film places a melancholy

fondness on a criminal's hard-earned wisdom.

The opening sequence is one of the best I've seen in a while, an extended, emotionally intoxicating meet-cute between the widowed Jewell (a phenomenal Sissy Spacek) and Forrest. The duo make for one of the most delightful onscreen pairings of the ages, their chemistry truly magnetic. Casey Affleck, as detective John Hunt, is effectively understated as he struggles with the dilemma of admiring the criminal or becoming a hero himself for catching him. The



internal conflicts are well expressed by both men as each are captivated in the other's commitment.

Lowery made the decision to shoot this film on actual 16mm, and the format fits the material perfectly.

The story is well-told with a unique vision that taps into everything from the early qualities of Robert Altman to many of the great heist films of the 1970s. We get snippets of Forrest's life, from a fantastic montage of his lifetime of prison breaks to his legendary riffs on life that are told through secondhand anecdotes from police officers and acquaintances. The story is well-balanced, but it could use more meat with its potatoes. I left wanting more.

This will rent as well as **HEARTS BEAT LOUD, LEAVE NO TRACE, RIDER, TULLY and THOROUGHBREDS.**





**1/22 THE HATE U GIVE DRAMA**  
\$25 MILL BO 2456 SCREENS **PG-13** 133 MINUTES  
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO  
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Amandla Stenberg (EVERYTHING EVERYTHING, AS YOU ARE, THE DARKEST MINDS, THE HUNGER GAMES)**

When you hear that a film is being lauded as ‘important,’ it may conjure up images of a saccharine after-school special. Thankfully, “The Hate U Give” avoids falling into that trap. Based on the bestselling book by [Angie Thomas](#), the film’s strength is its focus on a young, black, female lead character. It gives a voice to a segment that’s underrepresented on screen, making this a socially relevant movie that should be seen by everyone.

Starr Carter ([Amandla Stenberg](#)) is constantly switching between two worlds: the poorer and mostly black neighborhood where she lives and the rich and mostly white private school she attends. She is lucky to have a strong support system including her dad Maverick ([Russell Hornsby](#)), mom Lisa ([Regina Hall](#)), and uncle Carlos ([Common](#)). The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr is in the passenger seat of the car when a police officer fatally shoots Khalil ([Algee Smith](#)), her childhood best friend. As the only witness to the crime, the young girl faces pressures from both sides of the community and must find the courage to stand up for what’s right.

The film brings a new and fresh perspective from the viewpoint of a 16 year old heroine of color who is trying to find her voice and footing in a cruel world. What begins as an almost routine teen love story turns into a racially-tinged tragedy and finally, a call to activism. It’s a smart screenplay (by [Audrey Wells](#)) of a story that feels so real it could be based on true events. The story of an unarmed black man mistakenly shot by a white police officer sometimes feels formulaic but its message is an important one. Instead of solely focusing on injustice and anger that’s bubbling over, director [George Tillman Jr.](#) instead smartly chooses to concentrate on a girl who grows into an authoritative activist with a powerful voice that’s big enough to change the world.



There are some overly dramatic incidents and plenty of scenes with anger through tears that often undermine the gravity of story and subject matter, but the performances from the cast (including what is likely a career defining turn from Stenberg) provide the heart and soul of the film. The strong characters and meaningful performances create an emotional bond that caused me to care deeply about all of these people. I could feel how important these roles were to these actors and as a result, they became important to me. With this type of impassioned investment, the film becomes an effective expression of how a life can be taken away



in an instant. This would make the perfect companion film to “[Blindspotting](#).”

The film feels slightly too long but it never runs out of story. Some things are a little too cut and dried, with big ideas being spelled out in the most basic fashion for the audience. It sometimes feels like Maverick is a pastor rather than a caring dad. He may be a fountain of wisdom but by the end of the film, his lengthy monologues just feel downright preachy.

In the end, “The Hate U Give” is a strong, far-reaching tale of black female empowerment and dignity. Love is bigger than hate, and when society fails to care about others who inhabit our planet, it is a clear-cut sign that we’ve failed at an act of basic humanity.

This one will rent as well as **SORRY TO BOTHER YOU, BLACKKKLANSMAN, 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE, and ACRIMONY.**



## 1/22 JOHNNY ENGLISH STRIKES AGAIN

COMEDY

\$5 MILL BO 552 SCREENS PG 99 MINUTES  
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO  
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

**Rowan Atkinson (JOHNNY ENGLISH REBORN, MR. BEAN'S WEDDING, KEEPING MUM, LOVE ACTUALLY, JOHNNY ENGLISH)**

Rowan Atkinson's Johnny English hasn't changed a bit in the nearly two decades since he originated in a series of credit card commercials before landing his own spinoff feature. Today, he remains an analog spy in a digital world, equally uncomfortable with smartphones, electric cars, and women in power. Yet rather than engage with the idiot-savant spy's outmoded beliefs and tactics or examine how his self-professed "old-school" masculinity functions in the midst of a post-Brexit England where the prime minister (Emma Thompson) is female, David Kerr's lifeless *Johnny English Strikes Again* simply coasts on the series's low stakes and bland, outdated spoofing of pre-Daniel Craig-era James Bond plot devices and characterizations.

The film's humor is clearly pitched toward kids, but that makes it all the more baffling that the targets of its satire will now only be recognized by those too old to be amused by Johnny English's simple-minded antics. Opening with the hacking of the British Intelligence agency MI7 and the swift introduction of a Jeff Bezos-like villain, Jason Volta (Jake Lacy), this third entry in the *Johnny English* series takes an initial stab at relevancy. But these attempts to grapple with the effects of technology on modern politics are quickly thwarted as the paper-thin plot—in which Volta almost instantaneously convinces the PM to store all of England's top-secret data on his company's private network—devolves into little more than a smokescreen for a series of loosely connected and uninspired bits of physical humor.



Atkinson's unwavering energy, even in the most asinine sequences, is laudable simply for the actor's sheer commitment. However, the very nature of his character necessitates an adherence to spy-film clichés that not only don't play to the actor's strengths, but lead to inconsistencies where Johnny English is suave and proficient in one scene and a bumbling fool the next. It's as if the filmmakers and Atkinson wanted to make a Mr. Bean film but were forced to repeatedly return to parodying 007 in order to justify *Johnny English Strikes Again's* existence.

This will rent as well as **JOHNNY ENGLISH, HAPPYTIME MURDERS, SPY WHO DUMPED ME, UNCLE DREW and EARLY MAN.**



**1/22 THE WIFE DRAMA**  
**\$9 MILL BO 1382 SCREENS R 100 MINUTES**  
**DVD/BLU RAY DIGITAL COPY WITH THE BLU RAY**

**Glenn Close (TV---DAMAGES, THE SHIELD---FILM ---FATAL ATTRACTION, GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY, THE STEPFORD WIVES, AIR FORCE ONE, IN & OUT, HOOK)**

Some of cinema's greatest works have relied on the close-up of a woman's face in order to confront the audience with the ambiguities that only the human face can hold. And the expressions on those faces often come in response to the rarely reasonable demands of men. It's in the sight of Maria Falconetti's Joan of Arc pleading for her life before the male jurists in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*; the crumbling visage of Liv Ullman's Marianne in *Scenes from a Marriage*, dumbfounded by the avowal of her husband's betrayal and

imminent departure; and in Greta Garbo's lovestruck and totem-like countenance in *Queen Christina*. Not for nothing did Roland Barthes famously describe Garbo's eyes as "two tremulous wounds."

In *The Wife*, it's Glenn Close's face, simmering with a storm of contradictions, that haunts the viewer from beginning to end. Though Björn Runge's film could hardly be described as great cinema, Close's perennial look of astonishment and resilience borrows from the misery of the aforementioned women of cinema, and of feminine despair writ large. It commands the action to the point of turning every other screen element into a gratuitous prop.

Close plays Joan, the wife of world-renowned writer Joe Castleman (Jonathan Pryce), who's about to get the Nobel Prize for literature. From the start, Joan seems paralyzed by the realization that she has wasted her life devoting herself to a man incapable of even the most momentary act of selflessness. Close's eyes, too, are two tremulous wounds, twitching with wrath and mourning, newfound anger, and an all-too-familiar tendency for acquiescence.



As Joan and Joe head to Sweden with their son, David (Max Irons), to accept the Nobel Prize, the viewer learns that it's Joan who should be getting the award, not Joe. The confrontation of this injustice could and should have been sufficient dramatic focus here: the settling of accounts of a man and a woman in an insipid hotel room in Stockholm as the unevenness of their domestic deal emerges. But Runge, whose film is based on the 2003 novel of the same name by Meg Wolitzer, adds several unnecessary subplots that ultimately dilute the gravitas that Close brings to this project, including one in which an insistent biographer, Nathaniel (Christian Slater), tries to pit the Castlemans against one another so that he can get juicy tidbits for an unauthorized book on Joe, and another in which the childish David nags his father to give him feedback on a short story that David wrote.



Close's stare, whenever we're allowed a few seconds to bask in it, keeps reminding us of the triteness behind the film's attempts at concocting a traditional narrative—one with villains, flashbacks, and drinks spilt on fancy gowns. When Close isn't in the frame to subtly distill Joan's pent-up emotions, *The Wife* beats us over the head with a morality tale of women not standing a chance in the workplace. This is particularly true in a flashback scene where the young Joan (Annie Starke) meets a cartoonishly bitter female author who tells her she shouldn't write because she'll never get men's attention and her books will end up, at best, in the alumni shelf of some university bookstore, never to be read. Though there may be truth in that message, it's one that already lives in Close's face in less literal ways. As such, pairing an actress of Close's caliber with such banal material makes everything that isn't articulated by Close herself feel like soap-operatic redundancy.

This will rent as well as **BOOK CLUB, DISOBEDIENCE, EVERY DAY, LOVE SIMON, and LEAVE NO TRACE.**



**1/29 HUNTER KILLER ACTION**  
\$17 MILL BO 1946 SCREENS **R** 122 MINUTES  
DVD/BLU RAY DIGITAL COPY WITH THE BLU RAY

**Gerard Butler (DEN OF THIEVES, THE HURT LOCKER, OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN, THE BOUNTY HUNTER)**

The simple, straightforward “Hunter Killer” is as basic as they come, but its solid storytelling makes this mainstream military thriller one that’s worth watching. This is familiar territory, especially in the line of submarine films, but the action is fun and the film is an engaging dose of testosterone.

American submarine Captain Joe Glass (Gerard Butler) is on the hunt for a U.S. sub in distress in the Arctic Ocean. When the crew discovers a secret Russian military coup erupting, the United States send in secret ops to free the kidnapped Russian President (Alexander Diachenko). Suddenly, Glass faces a new mission: rescue the team of Navy SEALs and the Russian President and get them safely onboard the submarine in order to stop World War III.

The plot may be far-fetched, but the movie isn’t dumb. The story feels a little dated and generic, but the film is engaging. Plagued early on by bored performances from Butler and the supporting cast (including Gary Oldman, Common, and Linda Cardellini), the film picks up steam as the action sequences deliver. Some of the underwater submarine special effects are laughable, but none of these criticisms matter.

This is an entertaining, intense, basic action film that’ll likely be brutally reviewed by critics who feel they are too good for solid popcorn entertainment like this. If you’re a fan of movies like “The Hunt for Red October” and “Crimson Tide,” you’ll enjoy this one too.

This will rent as well as **PEPPERMINT, MILE 22, SICARIO 2, BREAKING IN and RED SPARROW.**

