

MOVIESHORTS

BIUTIFUL

★★★★☆
In “No Country For Old Men,” Javier Bardem’s serial killing character unleashed death upon his victims with the click of a trigger. But in “Biutiful,” Bardem tangos with the Grim Reaper for a cruelly drawn-out time in his darkly poignant portrayal of a dying man. The film tells the story of Uxbal (Javier Bardem), a man who finds work for illegal immigrants in Barcelona. At the same time, Uxbal is coming to grips with his terminal cancer diagnosis and keeping his condition to himself. The movie’s grimness has a personal spin, giving dying, poverty

and abuse a real face. Bloody urine, a burned mattress and cracks in the ceilings never allows the audience a moment to turn away from Uxbal’s rough world and imminent destruction. While the movie does show sentimentality in the relationship between Uxbal and his two kids, it takes a stronger angle in looking at Uxbal’s effort to ensure his children’s security after he dies. This requires him to hostilely remove them from their deranged mother, ensure heirlooms are put in place and tie the perpetually loosening ends in his trade. Javier Bardem works this role of a dying man with enough discomfort to make all of his actions seem

as if he has a sniper aiming at him throughout the entire film. The movie’s touch of magical realism with Uxbal’s ability to communicate with the dead is never distracting. It comes along subtly and adds a compelling element to the main character’s journey. Some of the film’s minor characters involved with Uxbal’s work are underdeveloped and feel like sporadic additions to the plot. But the movie ultimately retains its focus and ironically brings dying to life.

-Lyle Kendrick

BARNEY’S VERSION

★★★★☆

No one would ever choose to cast themselves in a self-deprecating way, as a biting, sarcastic and selfish asshole. Then again, we haven’t met Barney Panofsky (Paul Giamatti). “Barney’s Version” pulls the audience into the last place we expect to be: rooting for the egotistical prick. When Detective O’Hearne publishes his version of Barney’s past — a smudged love life, marked by gaffe after gaffe, and the alleged murder of his friend Boogie — Barney’s life comes sharply into focus. Flashing back to 1974 in Rome, where he marries an outspoken “conversation piece” because he impregnated her, Barney’s life is dealt the first blow. Relationship No. 2 seems more stable. But Barney isn’t in love yet — at least, not until the day of his wedding, when he meets Miriam (Rosamund Pike). Against all notions of what is proper, the blunt Barney pursues her until his marriage cracks. Giamatti’s depiction is heart-wrenching in its precision. Barney may cast some to the wayside, he might treat people with disdain that could only be mastered after years of drinking, lack of interest in others and a smug appreciation for oneself — and yet, Giamatti oscillates between the drunk cigar-smoking imitation of a man and ruthlessly in love so perfectly that we forgive him for being the for-

mer, as we imagine Miriam does. Like many novel-to-movie adaptations, the film is thought to lose something in translation. Barney never narrates and the audience never sees the way recalling the past entangles in his own mind. But if the audience was anywhere closer to Barney’s thoughts, Barney would teeter on the brink of self-indulgence before toppling into an abyss of alcohol and cigar smoke. Instead, director Richard Lewis shows us just the right amount to make the story come to life, without bogging it down.

-Rachel Arnett

UNKNOWN

★★★★☆
“Compelling” is one of those empty words often assigned to films which keep your attention without delivering on their promises. That being said, “Unknown” is extremely compelling. While the film exploits the potential for suspense and thrills offered by its premise, its tonal and rhythmic ambiguities prevent it from amounting to anything more than a subpar suspense thriller. The story centers on a biotechnologist named Martin Harris (Liam Neeson) who, after waking from an accident-related coma in Berlin, discovers that some conspiracy involving his wife has stolen all verifiable forms of his iden-

tity. With the help of a cabbie from his car accident (Diane Kruger), he searches for the truth while evading those trying to conceal it. The film elicits sharp suspense but not always in the right places. Endowing even the smallest of moments with such tension, it constantly demands strict attention to unnecessary details which only bog down the film’s uneven pace. The action sequences aim to establish greater momentum, but even these suffer from kinetic imbalance. Frenetic montages occasionally slowed to real time for a mysterious one-liner or two, these adrenaline-charged scenes never manage to adrenalize. Neeson and Kruger thankfully distract from these formalistic pitfalls by intensifying the audience’s thirst for the truth. As a lost man ravaged by his loss of identity, Neeson pierces the heart of what makes this premise work. And Kruger, aloof in her German hipster sex appeal, has you guessing what she’s up to at every turn. When the film finally surfaces from its own sea of suspense, it doesn’t find time to breathe. The ambitious 15 minutes between its revelatory twist and its finale rush by without you noticing. Nevertheless, the film proves to be a compelling ride through the suspense thriller formula. Keyword: compelling.

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