

TORONTO REVIEWS

THE LIBERTINE ★★★

Starring Johnny Depp, Samantha Morton and John Malkovich. Directed by Laurence Dunmore. Written by Stephen Jeffreys. Produced by John Malkovich, Lianne Halfon and Russell Smith. No distributor set. Drama. Not yet rated. Running time: 130 min.

Johnny Depp adds another notch to his memorable gallery of film roles with his portrait of John Wilmot, the debauched Second Earl of Rochester who went head to head with King Charles II in the late 1600s. Opening with the Earl telling the audience that they won't like him by the time his story has been told, "The Libertine" quickly throws one into the filth and grime of 17th-century England. It's a brutally realistic evocation of the time—perhaps the most authentic ever consigned to film—and one that makes a mockery of prettified and overly art-directed movies like "Barry Lyndon."

The rapier wit dialogue of playwright Stephen Jeffreys, adapting his own play to the screen, sings, too; these are words that stick with the viewer. Buoyed by Michael Nyman's insistent but haunting score and the effectively underplayed, candlelit cinematography by Alexander Melman, "The Libertine" adeptly sets a mood that is highly seductive. The film is also sexually forthright in a manner rarely seen onscreen but highly true to its time and place.

It all soon runs out of steam as its story sputters to a halt, becoming sidetracked by the less interesting dalliance of the Earl and Elizabeth Barry (an underused Samantha Morton), an actress whom he rescues from career oblivion. That part of the film—and a pulling back from Depp's more negative persona, such as in his mistreatment of his wife—is too conventional, even hackneyed. It's a shame because so much of "The Libertine"—including John Malkovich's chilling portrayal of the King—really stands out. A fine feature debut for director Laurence Dunmore, "The Libertine" is more of a calling card for his future work than a fully rounded triumph in its own right. —*Shlomo Schwartzberg*



Johnny Depp portrays the hedonistic Earl of Rochester in the 17th-century-set drama "The Libertine."

THE NINTH DAY ★★

Starring Ulrich Matthes, August Diehl and Bibiana Beglau. Directed by Volker Schlöndorff. Written by Eberhard Görner and Andreas Pflüger. Produced by Juergen Haase. No distributor set. Drama. German- and French-language; subtitled. Not yet rated. Running time: 98 min.

The true story of a Catholic priest from Luxembourg who must choose between cooperating with the Nazis or being returned to a concentration camp makes for a curiously uninvolved and emotionless film, considering the life-and-death issues it confronts. Based on a true story, "The Ninth Day" counts down the remaining time of Father Kremer (Ulrich Matthes) as he wrestles with his faith, tries to decide what actions to take and attempts to make contact with his mentor, the local bishop, who has begun to quietly oppose the German occupiers.

Unfortunately, this meaty drama is helmed by German director Volker Schlöndorff ("The Handmaid's Tale"), who has a tendency to drown his movies in overly earnest and heavy-handed exposition. So we get a lot of talking, a few debates and, regrettably, a screenplay that lets the Catholic Church off the hook for its failure to adequately oppose Hitler. Static and dull, "The Ninth Day" squanders the potential of its inherently dramatic story. —*Shlomo Schwartzberg*

THE SEA INSIDE ★★★★★

Starring Javier Bardem, Belen Rueda and Lola Duenas. Directed by Alejandro Amenabar. Written by Alejandro Amenabar and Mateo Gil. Produced by Fernando Bovaira and Alejandro Amenabar. No distributor set. Drama. Spanish-language; subtitled. Not yet rated. Running time: 125 min.

Often when films (such as "Whose Life is it Anyway?") tackle difficult subjects like euthanasia, they soften it with tepid lectures on morality. In "The Sea Inside," Alejandro Amenabar has created a stunningly lyrical movie that takes us inside the imagination of a quadriplegic man (Javier Bardem). Rather than seeking death in order to end his tragic life, he wishes instead to simply be free of the body he's trapped in.

"The Sea Inside" is based loosely on the true story of the Galician sailor Ramon Sampedro, who became paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident. He later began a long legal tussle with the Spanish government for the right to die. Although Spanish law wouldn't permit it, Sampedro eventually carried out an assisted suicide with the help of many friends to prevent any one person being charged.

"The Sea Inside," which has cascading dream-like imagery, is anchored by the rock-steady performance of Javier Bardem. Although he's predominantly confined to a bed, Bardem is so expressive that every tiny movement he makes is charged with meaning. The movie also adds a couple of subplots that work marvelously: a lawyer (Belen Rueda) who is suffering from a wasting disease becomes his fantasy lover and kindred spirit; and Rosa (Lola Duenas), a working-class mother who initially seeks to dissuade him from his goal, gradually comes to see the world through his eyes. "The Sea Inside" is a film about death that is consistently brimming with life. —*Kevin Courrier*

SUCKER FREE CITY ★★★★★

Starring Anthony Mackie, Ben Crowley, Ken Leung, John Savage, Kathy Baker, Darris Love, Laura Wade, Malieek Straughter, T.V. Carpio and Jim Brown. Directed by Spike Lee. Written by Alex Tse. Produced by Preston Holmes. No distributor set. Drama. Not yet rated. Running time: 105 min.

Arguably the subtlest movie Spike Lee has ever made, "Sucker Free City" explores race, class and generational issues in three San Francisco communities. Gentrification of the once eclectic Mission District forces residents like the white Wade family (John Savage and Kathy Baker portray the parents) to find more affordable digs in Hunters Point, a predominantly African-American neighborhood plagued by unemployment and gangs.

Teen hip-hop wannabe Nick Wade (Ben Crowley) is harassed by Leon (Malieek Straughter), a volatile leader of the dominant V-Dub Gang. Luckily, K-Luv (Anthony Mackie), the only member with a conscience, offers Nick protection in return for help running a bootleg CD operation. Meanwhile, Chinatown spawns its own thugs, including the hotheaded Lincoln (Ken Leung). He's secretly sleeping with Angela (T.V. Carpio), the daughter of his malevolent boss. Shot as a TV series pilot that Showtime then rejected, this intriguing Spike Lee "joint" deserves a theatrical run. —*Susan Green*