

Four comedies consider single-minded characters

By Judith Trojan
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Touchstone has another potential winner with "Turner & Hooch," an endearing man-and-beast comedy featuring Tom Hanks ("Big") as the man.

Small-town California police detective Scott Turner (Hanks) leads a compulsively neat and orderly lifestyle. Health and fitness are his bywords and his regimented schedule leaves no room for a wife and children, let alone a pet.

When his pending career move to the Sacramento police force is waylaid by the murder of an old houseboat crony, Amos (John McIntire), Turner is forced to literally hogtie the murder's only witness — Amos' nasty, vulgar watchdog, Hooch — and parlay the beast away from the pound and into the investigation. (Turner's life is never the same again.)

It should come as no surprise that the smelly, drooling, clawing, gnawing Hooch decimates Turner's previously tidy household faster than Turner can buy dog biscuits. The mastiff's deliberate destruction of most of Turner's worldly goods is a riot to behold, as Turner's initial attempts to treat Hooch like a trainable house pet.

Although celluloid clichés abound as their relationship evolves from disgust and distrust to love and affection, this man-beast tale is as entertaining and genuinely affecting as they come. Directed by Roger Spottiswoode ("Shoot to Kill"), the film makes the most of Hanks' ability to be believably adult and endearingly childlike at the same time. This wonderful quality — a definite draw for female adult and youth audiences — gives him an edge in scenes shared with the incredible Hooch (Beasley), a dog whose face resembles E.T.'s in some shots.

Hooch's feisty veterinarian, Emily Carson (Mare Winningham), provides a non-nonsense love interest for Turner. And despite the briefly violent climax that will unsettle pet lovers, the film ends with a positive, upbeat nod to the virtues of family life — both human and canine.

Due to some minimal locker-room language, brief, mildly intense violence and an implied sexual encounter between the

unmarried protagonists, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

'Valentino Returns'

A lackluster 1950s coming-of-age drama papered with rock 'n' roll hits of the period, "Valentino Returns" (Skouras) is an independent production in search of inspiration.

Tracking the numbingly dull lives of the Gibbs who inhabit a small Central Valley town in California, the film mostly unfolds during a 24-hour period. Although first-time filmmaker Peter Hoffman ostensibly has young Wayne Gibbs (Barry Tubb) as his central focus, Wayne's feisty parents, Sonny (Frederic Forrest) and Pat (Veronica Cartwright), steal the show.

Based on Leonard Gardner's short story "Christ Has Returned to Earth and Preaches Here Nightly," and adapted for the screen by Gardner ("Fat City"), "Valentino Returns" aims to capture the frustrations of young adult males searching for sexual action on a typical Saturday night.

Wayne, his buddies and even his philandering father are borderline Neanderthals who will jump at any chance to bed a woman of easy virtue. But the young guys are so dumb, they can't make it to first base with anyone except young Sylvia Fuller (Jenny Wright), the lusty, battered daughter of an egg farmer who drags his daughter to revival meetings to save her tainted soul. (One revival tent banner reads "Christ Has Returned to Earth and Preaches Here Nightly," hence the title of the short story.)

Meanwhile, party maven Sonny has compromised his marriage so many times that wife Pat finally leaves him and moves across town. Since Pat can't live with Sonny or without him, their comical on-again, off-again relationship unfolds as a welcome relief to the picture of Wayne's aimless life, spent cruising for empty action in his shiny new pink Cadillac named "Valentino Returns."

While Sonny, Pat and even sultry Sylvia and her brutish evangelical father have all the ingredients for an inspired film, Hoffman lets Wayne and his Cadillac get in the way.



Actor Tom Hanks teams up with a sloppy, junkyard dog named Hooch in "Turner & Hooch." The U.S. Catholic Conference describes the film as "an endearing man-and-beast comedy."

Due to some rough language laced with sexual vulgarities, implied promiscuity and some nudity, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

'UHF'

"Weird Al" Yankovic, the music parodist and pop culture satirist, extends his jabs into filmland with "UHF" (Orion Pictures), his silver-screen comedy debut.

As a loser with a vivid imagination, Yankovic plays George Newman, a clean-living guy who can't make a living until he takes over as manager of the family-owned UHF Channel 62. Turning his prolific daydreams into pay dirt, George saves the channel from sure bankruptcy by concocting such offbeat shows as "Wheel of Fish," hosted by his karate instructor-landlord; "Underwater Bingo for Teens," "Conan the Librarian" and "Gandhi II" ("He's back, and this time ... he's mad!").

Yankovic has a field day with these parodies of popular TV shows, and films. "UHF" features extended dream sequences joshing Indiana Jones and Rambo, and a final fade from "Gone with the Wind." Yankovic stars in most of these nutty vignettes and has an able supporting cast featuring Victoria Jackson ("Saturday Night Live") as his girlfriend, Billy Barty as his pint-sized cameraman and Michael Richards as his janitor-cum-kids' show star, Jerry Lewis clone Stanley Spadowski. The direction by Jay Levey, Yankovic's manager and music video director, is itself a parody.

It should come as no surprise that Newman saves Channel 62 from the greedy hands of his network competitor, R.J. Fletcher (Kevin McCarthy), or that the featherweight story takes a back seat to the parodies, most of which are silly flights of inoffensive slapstick.

The only reservation to viewing by younger adolescents are moments during one show called "Raul's Wild Kingdom" when apartment-dweller Raul (Trinidad Silva) demonstrates how he's teaching his poodles to fly (by throwing them out his upper-story window).

Due to minimal rough language and vulgar antics, plus some non-menacing cartoon violence played strictly for laughs, the USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG-13 —

parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Eat a Bowl of Tea'

Chinese-American independent filmmaker Wayne Wang ("Chan Is Missing," "Dim Sum") has worked his way up from independent art-house movies to more commercially viable productions with big-budget backing and wider release.

His latest, "Eat a Bowl of Tea" (Columbia), is a beautifully shot, acted and directed wry comedy about family life in New York's Chinatown circa 1949. It clearly showcases Wang's potential and his unmatched ability to convey the feel of the Chinese-American community.

Based on the novel by Louis Chu and adapted by Judith Rascoe, "Eat a Bowl of Tea" zeroes in on the frustrations of one middle-aged father, Wah Gay (Victor Wong), who desperately wants his GI son to snare a suitable Chinese bride and produce grandchildren.

Just back from the war, Ben Loy (Russell Wong) is an Americanized party animal but yields to his father's pressure to travel to China for a reunion with his mother and a meeting with Mei Oi (Cora Miao), a young woman with whom he has been matched. Amazingly, the couple hits it off, falls in love and marries.

Wah Gay and his numerous old cronies take every opportunity to pressure Ben Loy to beget the first of a new crop of Chinese-American grandchildren. This humiliation combined with his long work hours makes Ben Loy impotent; and lonely, miserable Mei Oi is finally tempted into an adulterous affair with a local lothario. How these marital difficulties evolve, are faced and are resolved — sometimes hilariously, sometimes touchingly — forms the focus of this delightful comedy.

Although overlong and saddled with too many dramatic high points, "Eat a Bowl of Tea" will enchant adult viewers with its portrayal of quirky, realistically flawed characters and their ethnic American family life.

Due to brief graphic violence, an adulterous liaison and some rough language laced with sexual innuendoes, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III adults.

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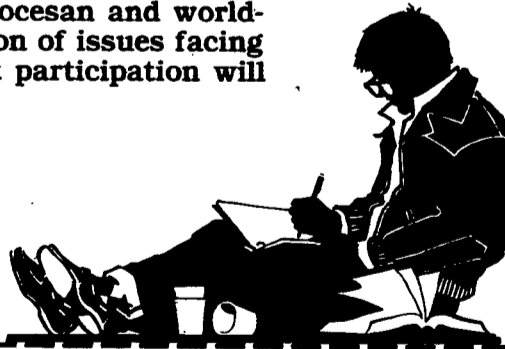
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