

FEATURE

'Count' is visually rich, well-told story

By Anne Navarro
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK (CNS) - Director Kevin Reynolds spins together jealousy, betrayal, mercy and redemption - and a few energetic sword fights - in the rousing adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' "The Count of Monte Cristo" (Touchstone).

The film stars Jim Caviezel as the noble, naive Edmond Dantes who reinvents himself as the sophisticated count, intent on taking revenge against those who wronged him. Caviezel carries his role with confidence and skill, treating the audience to a remarkable performance. It is a breakthrough role in some ways for the actor as he demonstrates a broader range than in his previous roles ("The Thin Red Line," "Angel Eyes," "Pay It Forward").

The guileless Edmond changes from a callow youth to a man hardened by years of grief and torment, wishing for nothing more than to taste sweet revenge. Then, with his eyes opened to God's loving nature, he finally grows in maturity, compassion, and even mercy. However, though Edmond's spiritual metamorphosis is evident, it is more subtle than in the book, as Reynolds unfortunately underplays Edmond's struggles with faith and God.

Edmond and Fernand (Guy Pearce) are fellow sailors and childhood friends who, when forced to take their injured captain to the restricted island of Elba (home of the exiled emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte), become embroiled in political intrigue and deception. Fernand pounces on the opportunity to rid himself of Edmond, for whom he has always harbored a nagging, undeniable jealousy. Fernand also sees it as a perfect opportunity to take Edmond's lovely fiancée, Mercedes (Dagmara Dominczyk). Edmond is thus falsely accused of treason by the coy Fernand, and sent to the infamous island prison, the remote Chateau D'If (run by a favorite villainous actor, Michael Wincott), for 13 long, tortuous years.

It is in this hellish confinement where Edmond meets a priest and fellow inmate, Abbe Faria (a brilliant Richard Harris). In exchange for helping him dig a tunnel by which they may escape, Faria molds Edmond into a Renaissance man who can make a sword dance, translate complicated text into Italian and work out intricate economic problems in his head. But more importantly, Faria reignites the spark of God in Edmond's soul. And he reveals to Edmond the secret locale of a fabulous gold treasure, which - after his novel escape - Edmond uses to transform himself into the Count of Monte Cristo, a worldly, wealthy man finally in a position to exact revenge on those who wronged him. And later, he also feels justified in reuniting with Mercedes, now married to Fernand.



Touchstone/CNS

Dagmara Dominczyk and Jim Caviezel star in a scene from director Kevin Reynolds' adaptation of Alexander Dumas' novel, "The Count of Monte Cristo."

Reynolds is a deft visual storyteller and he honors his source material in this opulent production. For his grand entrance, the count throws a lavish party - inviting all the right people - and floats down on a helium balloon before stepping out to greet his guests. The director has toned down the complexity of Dumas' extraordinary work, giving it a zippy, but not exhausting, pace, which works well on the big screen.

Shot in Ireland and Malta, the film is crammed with breathtakingly beautiful visuals. Purists may be disappointed, however, that a few narrative details from the book have been changed. The film's ending is a bit different as well, with a brighter conclusion and a slight movement away from the original lessons of mercy and justice.

To call him comic relief would be to belittle Luis Guzman's skillful performance. He plays Edmond's right-hand man, Jacopo, with zest and appropriate refinement, dovetailing moments of levity into

the otherwise earnest film just when it needs it the most. And, embodying his character the way few actors can, Harris is exceptional. He appears most unexpectedly, and unusually, and there is a noticeable deflation in the film when he exits.

Visually rich and handily told, "The Count of Monte Cristo" is a film that involves the audience with its one-man journey through social, spiritual and psychological paths to find love, honor and redemption at the end of the road.

Due to an implied affair, fleeting sexuality and intermittent sword fights and gunplay, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-II - adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 - parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Navarro is on the staff of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting.

'The Mothman' never quite gets in Gere

NEW YORK (CNS) - The following capsule reviews of movies contain ratings by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Office for Film and Broadcasting and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

'The Mothman Prophecies'

Patchy paranormal thriller about a Washington journalist (Richard Gere) investigating, with the help of a local police officer (Laura Linney), strange happenings in a West Virginia town where the people report sighting a moth-like creature which predicts impending disasters. Director Mark Pellington's eerie film promises more than it delivers, and is short on substance despite trying to capitalize on the story's links to real events. Brief violence, intermittent terror, fleeting sexuality and profanity. The USCCB classification is A-III - adults. The MPAA

rating is PG-13 - parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Snow Dogs'

Sluggish comedy about a successful Miami dentist (Cuba Gooding Jr.) whose inheritance of sled dogs in Alaska from his biological mother reveals he is adopted. Reference to his being conceived from a one-night stand may prompt questions from the young. Contains a few positive points about adoption and family love. The slapstick comedy is only mildly amusing. Crude humor and expressions. The USCCB classification is A-II - adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG - parental guidance suggested.

'A Walk to Remember'

A popular, shallow high school senior (Shane West) unexpectedly falls for a seriously religious classmate (Mandy Moore) who brings out the best in him de-

spite her own personal crisis. Director Adam Shankman's teen romance travels a predictable route but excels in affirming faith values as a positive, joyous part of life. Some sexual references and crass language. The USCCB classification is A-II - adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG - parental guidance suggested.

'Time of Favor'

In this flawed yet thought-provoking drama, a young military officer (Aki Avni) falls for the daughter (Tinkerbell) of an Orthodox rabbi (Asi Dayan) who wants her to marry his prize pupil (Edan Alterman). As presented by director Joseph Cedar, clear judgment is clouded by religious devotion, personal will and political commitment. The thriller's build-up is more engrossing than its melodramatic finale. Subtitles. Brief violence, menacing situations and some crass language. The USCCB classification is A-II - adults and adolescents. Not rated by the MPAA.

Pathetic
offensive

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'American Pie 2'

Coarse comedy sequel in which a group of college guys (including Jason Biggs, Chris Klein and Jason William Scott) reunite on summer vacation intent on increasing their sexual prowess by scheming and partying. Director J.B. Rogers' pleading pathetic effort recycles plot points from the first film, again presenting sex as raunchy sports, devoid of responsibility or consequences. Postive spin on premarital sex, plus masturbation, same-sex kissing, homosexuality, objectification of women, rough language, and underage drinking. The USCCB classification is G - morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R - restricted (Universal).

'Babe'

Live-action barnyard charmer in which a kindly Australian farmer (James Cromwell) enters his unusual piglet (voice of Christine Cavanaugh) in a sheepdog competition, unaware that his farm animals can talk to one another as they pull together to make the little pig's dream of herding sheep come true. Director Chris Noonan's enchanting comic drama is filmed entirely from the animal's point of view, with delightful visuals and an endearing message of learning to live and work in harmony. The USCCB classification is A-I - general patronage. The MPAA rating is G - general audiences (Universal).

'The Fast and the Furious'

High-octane, low-interest action drama about an undercover cop (Paul Walker) out to nail a gang led by Vin Diesel) of street racers turned hijackers. His ideals are compromised by an affair with the gang leader's sister (Jordana Brewster). Director Rob Cohen's formulaic thriller chases cops, alienates with its macho posturing for a dull, predictable tale of justice. Brief violence, profanity, multiple sexual references, and occasional drug use.

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