

Masters of illusion

Five films explore collision of reality, fantasy **Michael D. Reid**

Hollywoodland

(Allen Coulter)
OK, so it won't be confused with Chinatown, the Robert Towne noir classic it so shamelessly references. Still, director Allen Coulter's Rashomon-style whodunit – inspired by events surrounding the mysterious death of George Reeves, self-loathing star of the 1950s Superman TV series – is a respectable excursion into old Hollywood. A lush, eye-filling panorama of retro Tinseltown architecture, costumes, quirks and colourful characters – the shady, redemption-bound gumshoe; opportunistic fiancée; mob-connected mogul, etc. – this evocative snapshot of colliding illusion and reality features a decent performance by Ben Affleck, cast as the smarmy yet charismatic victim.



BOB HOSKINS IS HOLLYWOODLAND GUMSHOE.



EDWARD NORTON GIVES AN UNDERSTATED PERFORMANCE AS A LOVELORN MASTER IN THE ILLUSIONIST.

The Illusionist

(Neil Burger)
Illusion, treachery, romantic intrigue and biblical metaphors complement chameleonic Edward Norton's understated performance as a lovelorn master illusionist who runs afoul of a dangerously hostile Austrian prince in turn-of-the-century Vienna. Adapted from Steven Millhauser's short story by Neil Burger, this slight, finely crafted and thoughtfully mesmerizing period piece eschews digital trickery for real-time stage magic. It's sure to cast a spell in your living room.

Snakes on a Plane

(David R. Ellis)
Invite some friends over and break out the popcorn to best appreciate David R. Ellis's tongue-in-cheek cult flick, one you won't see as an in-flight movie anytime soon. Hilarity dwarfs horror as fake-looking snakes with an appetite for naughty bits feast on airline passengers,

including Samuel L. Jackson as a potty-mouthed FBI agent. "Wait for the DVD!" warned venom-spewing critics when this racy, gory cheeseball slithered into theatres. Well, here it is.



SAMUEL L. JACKSON'S POTTY-MOUTHED FBI AGENT HAS HIS HOOKS IN A RATHER FAKE-LOOKING SNAKE.



ROBIN WILLIAMS SEEMS MISCAST AS GAY RADIO HOST IN THE NIGHT LISTENER.

Half Nelson

(Ryan Fleck)
Expect to see Ryan Gosling's name on the Oscar slate for his muted, devastating portrayal of a crack-addicted Brooklyn high

school history teacher who inspires his inner-city students by day and struggles with his demons by night. Rather than the variation on Stand and Deliver you might have expected, Ryan Fleck's challenging, nuanced



GOSLING'S HALF NELSON ROLE IS OSCAR-WORTHY.

character study and portrait of addiction percolates with grim realism and humanity.

The Night Listener

(Patrick Stettner)
A miscast Robin Williams survives the narrative obstacles that litter this slow-paced, mediocre but moderately compelling drama about a depressed, gay New York late-night radio host who suspects a young fan who claims to have been sexually abused and dying of AIDS might not exist. This intriguing film has some relevance, arriving as it does on the heels of the James Frey hoax scandal, but it doesn't quite stand up to scrutiny.

Michael D. Reid is a movie reviewer and columnist for the Victoria Times Colonist.

DVDs: Our critics' picks
Extras: The Complete First Season
This Film Is Not Yet Rated
Half Nelson
Hollywoodland
The Illusionist
MI-5, Volume 4
Monsters & Madmen (The Haunted Strangler/Corridors of Blood/The Atomic Submarine/First Man Into Space)/Mouchette
Romantic Favourites Collection (Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason/Love Actually/Notting Hill/About a Boy)
Yojimbo & Sanjuro: Two Films by Akira Kurosawa