

New release reviews

The Bling Ring

★★★★★

(18+) USA/UK/France/Germany/Japan, 2013. Katie Chang, Israel Broussard, Emma Watson

There may be no more fitting director to dramatise 'The Bling Ring' – a group of real-life celebrity-obsessed teens who systematically broke into the homes of the stars they adored – than Sofia Coppola. The daughter of *Godfather* director Francis Ford, Coppola Junior paints the milieu of pampered California kids and A-list parties with a steady hand and knowing wink. And she's no stranger to both lost girls (see 1999 directional debut, *The Virgin Suicides*), nor exploring the fractured notion of celebrity (2010's *Somewhere*).

Adapting 2010 Vanity Fair feature 'The Suspects Wore Louboutins', Coppola's screenplay documents how the group stalked celebrity homes with Google Earth, used gossip sites to track when Lindsay Lohan, Orlando Bloom, Paris Hilton and many others were out of town, then zeroed in, making off with more than \$3 million (Dhs11 million) worth of designer gear in a ten-month crime spree. There's an obvious commentary on consumerism and celebrity culture that doesn't need much exposition, but Coppola can't help but treat us to plenty of glowing brand fetishism, fast cutting through their stolen booty with the gloss of a fashion ad. But it's the outrageous excesses found in Hilton's wardrobes – who put up her own home for shooting – which steal the show.

Despite the cosmetic modernisms – Coppola has a penchant for steadycam, and likes to abuse the



slow-mo – it's amazing how similar the narrative is to one of daddy's gangster classics. Revolving around the core, innocent romance of Rebecca (Rachel Lee) and Marc (Nick Prugo), the ring start small with unlocked cars and friends' homes, building up slowly to greater celebrity conquests, before getting cocky, over indulging recklessly, betraying one another and meeting an untimely demise as jailbirds.

In Coppola's hands the camera feels clinically detached and non-judgemental, and as much as the film factually fascinates for 90 minutes, *The Bling Ring's* biggest problem is that the subjects at its core are as weightless and vacuous as the celebrities they fawn over. So perhaps it's fitting that the closing scenes hint at the real-life aftermath where, like all good movie criminals, the ring become celebrities themselves, ironically obtaining the lifestyle they sought so hard to imitate. *Rob Garratt*

Byzantium

★★★★★

(TBA) UK/USA/Ireland, 2012. Saoirse Ronan, Gemma Arterton, Caleb Landry Jones

The tween-angst vampires of *Twilight* have had their run; now it's time for some more grown-up bloodsuckers to take the stage. Eleanor (Ronan) and Clara (Arterton) are the toothy immortals at the centre of Neil Jordan's moody, mesmeric horror film. They're youthful in appearance, but pushing nearly two centuries of clandestine living among the Irish underclass. Unfortunately, they're forced to go on the run after Clara beheads another of their race and end up in a small seaside town, where they turn a decrepit hotel into a thriving business.

Ashen atmosphere is paramount; grey skies, barren pebble-stone beaches, shadowy underpasses. Jordan's poetic sensibilities and uncanny aptitude for conjuring up resonantly metaphorical



images – from a pointed fingernail pushing toward a vein to a waterfall turning into a literal river of blood – proves there's plenty of life left in this undead genre. *Keith Uhlich*

The Sapphires

★★★★★

(15+) Australia, 2012. Chris O'Dowd, Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy

The Sapphires were an all-girl soul group, four aboriginal Australian women who raised the roof touring Vietnam in 1968 performing to US soldiers. But before you start humming 'Dreamgirls goes Down Under', there's more at play here. Opening with a shocking (but disputed) caption claiming that indigenous Australians were not classified as humans until 1967, but instead 'flora of fauna', at home this is a film which has been credited with reopening the discussion on race relations.

Adapted from a hit musical it tells the story of how three sisters enter a rigged talent contest. Heckled off the stage, a washed-up Irish musician sees something, weeds them off Merle Haggard and schools them in Motown. After an emotional reunion with a fair-skinned lost cousin, a member of the 'lost generation' snatched in childhood and raised in 'White ways', they get the gig in Vietnam, beginning a typical road movie, complete with diner-stops of sibling rivalry, distracting love interests and military attack.

The movie succeeds because it never gets heavy handed or polemic, instead working moments of everyday prejudice incidentally into the story



so clearly that any thinking person couldn't fail to be disgusted. Smartly the filmmakers use Martin Luther King's assassination as a dramatic device, as well as painting prejudice in the US army, demonstrating that racism is a worldwide problem.

The only real misfire is that Chris O'Dowd's rambling Irishman never really existed, a worrying addition suggesting both a white force, and a man, was needed to get the girls going. Otherwise though, with its blend of sisterhood, feel-good tunes, and self-evident message, it's hard not to imagine this film warming even the coldest of cockles. *Rob Garratt*

Phantom

★★★★★

(PG15) USA, 2013. Ed Harris, David Duchovny, William Fichtner

Manly, sharp-edged submarine B movies don't come along often anymore – so consider this Cold War off-white-knuckler a welcome blast of recycled air. It helps that writer-

director Todd Robinson takes on a real historical question; why the Soviet nuke-sub K-129 sunk in 1968. Once a KGB contingent seizes control of the boat and prepares to start WWII, it's mano-a-mano in a tin can, with Ed Harris and William Fichtner as old-school vets. As far as such potboilers go, *Phantom* is literate, tense and, thankfully, modest. *Michael Atkinson*

Previews

Hammer of the Gods

(18+) UK, 2013. Charlie Bewley, Clive Standen, James Cosmo

The first feature from longterm TV director Farren Blackburn – *Luther*, *Silent Witness* and, er, *Holby City* – this

871 AD-set action epic charts how a young man becomes a brutal warrior as his people rely on him to restore order to their kingdom. Early reports suggest this is a bit of a turkey, but fantasy fans may be in for a treat. *TO*

Officer Down

(15+) USA, 2013. Stephen Dorff, Stephen Lang, David Boreanaz

Straight up cop thriller about an officer with a shady past tasked with

investigating a series of vicious assaults against women. Lead Stephen Dorff has a long track record, while it's director Brian A Miller's third feature, following 2011's *House of the Rising Sun*. *TO*