MOVIES

'Dark City' even darker than director's 'The Crow'

TICKETS PLEASE

JOHN MONAGHAN

In a scenario straight out of Kafka, a man wakes one morning in a hotel room to find his memory has completely disappeared. When he's told that he's the number one suspect in a string of grisly murders, he's not sure whether he committed them or not.

"Dark City," the second film from "The Crow" director Alex Proyas, places us in an imaginary world where we're not sure of ourselves, where shadowy streets are shot from odd angles and the sun never bothers to rise.

Complex and uncompromising, "Dark City" is a visionary film that is both mind-boggling and mind-blowing. And while not all of it works, it's got enough wild ideas and crazy visuals for about a dozen films.

It has taken five years for Proyas, still haunted by Brandon Lee's accidental shooting death on "The Crow," to get this movie off the ground.

After stalled starts at other studios, title changes (it was advertised as everything from "Dark Empire" to "Dark World"), and a release date held back for almost a half year, the Australian writer/director finally delivers the movie exactly the way he envisioned it. In a world where movies are increasingly studio "products," this is reason enough to see it.

Which isn't to say that "Dark City" is a complete success. In many ways it's the maddening result of an imagination so active that you're worn out by the closing credits. In this sense it owes plenty to the oppressive visual style of German Expressionist silent films like "Metropolis" and "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari."

This is evident in the casting of star Rufus Sewell as well, who can't help but remind you of a young Peter Lorre. It's through his somewhat buggy eyes that he tries to discover exactly what happens each night when the clock stops at the stroke of midnight.

To reveal any more of the story would be unfair, because there are so many clever plot twists. But I will say that Proyas and his team of special effects wizards have invented bizarre ways to depict a city which reinvents itself nightly, with buildings sprouting from the ground.

As protagonist John Murdoch, Rufus Sewell makes a believable Everyman. You're sure you've seen him before, but not exactly where (unless you're a fan of BBC productions like "Middlemarch," where he is still best known.) This unfamiliar familiarity is a perfect complement to the film.

The rest of the cast employs an odd mix of styles and non-styles. As the police detective who tries to break Murdoch down, William Hurt injects his dry sense of humor but not much enthusiasm.

Think of Jennifer Connelly as more or less typecast since she walks through most of her movies, especially this one, without a clue.

Worst is Kiefer Sutherland, in the part of a doctor who extracts the memories from people with the help of special syringes. The part was supposed to be played by someone older (was father Donald busy or something?) and, worse yet, he adopts this stammer between each syllable that reminds you of a cross between William Shatner and Renfield.

As with those old German films (and the recent "City of Lost Children"), technique and amazing visuals can often get in the way of true audience empathy. We don't really care about Murdoch because director Proyas is essentially doing to him what the evil overseers do: moving a pawn throughout an elaborate labyrinth.

Maybe someday someone will make a film that wows us visually while offering characters we can really care about. Until then, we'll have to be satisfied with movies as ambitious and interesting as "Dark City."

John Monaghan welcomes your calls and comments. To leave John a voice mail message, dial (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1866.

JASON BOLAND/NEW LINE CINEMA

Thriller: *William Hurt stars in New Line Cinema's sci-fi thriller, "Dark City."*

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SPICE WORLD (PG)
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NP THE BORROWERS (PG)
NP APOSTLE (PG13)
TITANIC (PG13)
L.A. CONFIDENTIAL (R)
GOODWILL HUNTING (R)
WAG THE DOG (R)
AS GOOD AS IT GETS (PG13)
REPLACEMENT KILLERS (R)
BLUES BROTHERS 2000 (PG13)
DESPERATE MEASURES (R)
GREAT EXPECTATIONS (R)

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS (R)
WAG THE DOG (R)
L.A. CONFIDENTIAL (R)
SPICE WORLD (PG)
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GOOD WILL HUNTING (R)
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BLUES BROTHERS 2000 (PG13)
GREAT EXPECTATIONS (R)
SPICE WORLD (PG)
GOOD WILL HUNTING (R)
AS GOOD AS IT GETS (PG 13)
TITANIC (PG13)

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THE APOSTLE (PG13)
OSCAR AND LUCINDA (R)

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Children Under 6 Not Admitted

SCREEN SCENE

A sampling of what's playing at alternative movie theaters across metro Detroit as reviewed by John Monaghan.

Baldwin Theatre 415 S. Lafayette, Royal Oak. Call (248) 541-6430 for information. ($10)

Silent comedy night 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28; 2 p.m. Sunday, March 1. A quartet of exceptional short films from the early days of movies. Charlie Chaplin in "The Rink," Buster Keaton's "Cops," Laurel and Hardy in "Two Tars," and Harold Lloyd in "His Royal Slyness." Live organ accompaniment from Father Jim Miller.

Detroit Film Theatre Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call (313) 833-2323 for information. ($5.50; $4.50 students/seniors)

"Fire" (India/Canada-1996). Thursday, Feb. 27 to Sunday, March 1 (call for showtimes). A contemporary tale of two Indian women who fall in love, thus breaking the old order's bonds of obedience, fidelity, and silence.

"Conspirators of Pleasure" (Czech Republic-1996). 7:30 p.m. Monday, March 2. A bizarre new movie from Jan Svankmajer, the surrealist filmmaker ("Alice") who examines "ordinary people" who engage in obsessive, darkly comic rituals.

Magic Bag 22918 Woodward, Ferndale. Call (248) 544-3030 for information. ($2)

"The Fully Monty" (Britain-1996). 9:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 26. The Oscar-nominated comedy about a group out-of-work guys who think they can earn some fast money by performing as strippers. The only problem: their very non-Chippendale physiques.

Main Art Theatre 118 N. Main Street (at 11 Mile Road), Royal Oak. Films play through at least Thursday, unless noted otherwise. Call (248) 542-0180 for information. ($6.50; $4 students, seniors and matinee; $3 twilight)

"Live Flesh" (Spain-1997). The latest from Pedro Almodovar ("Women in the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown") as a well-drawn but surprisingly ordinary tale of murder, obsession, and unrequited love.

"The Apostle" (USA-1998). Robert Duvall wrote, directed, and starred in this story of a preacher who finds his personal road to salvation, helped in part by his wife (played by Farrah Fawcett).

"Oscar and Lucinda" (USA-1997). Ralph Fiennes plays a controversial wagering priest who finds his soulmate in heiress Cate Blanchett. Directed by Gillian Armstrong.

"Afterglow" (USA-1997). Julie Christie copped a Best Actress Oscar nomination for this tale of two couples whose troubled marriages become intertwined. Nick Nolte co-stars. Directed by Alan Rudolph ("Choose Me," "The Moderns.") Starts Friday.

Star Southfield 12 Mile Road (west of Telegraph), Southfield. Call (248) 372-2222. ($6.50; $4.50 before 6 p.m.)

"Four Days in September" (Brazil-1997). This story of the 1969 kidnapping of an American ambassador to Brazil (Alan Arkin) has been nominated for Best Foreign Film Oscar.

"Zero Effect" (USA-1998). From Jake Kasdan, son of writer/director/former Detroiter Lawrence Kasdan comes this quirky thriller about a Holmes-like detective (Bill Pullman) and his assistant (Ben Stiller) in search of a rich man's lost keys.

"Wag the Dog" (USA-1997). Robert DeNiro plays a Washington spin doctor extraordinaire who gets the President out of hot water by staging a fake war with Albania. Dustin Hoffman stars as the Hollywood producer who helps stage the ruse.

Windsor Film Theatre 2135 Wyandotte Street West, Windsor, Canada. Call (519) 254-FILM for specific film information. ($5.25 Canadian; $4 U.S.)

"Mon Oncle Antoine" (Canada-1971). 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 27 to Sunday, March 1. Set in 1940s Quebec, the movie charts one boy's haphazard passage into adulthood.

"Pitch" (Canada-1997). 9:15 p.m. Friday, Feb. 27 to Sunday, March 1. Two guys shamelessly try to pitch their screenplay at the Toronto International Film Festival in this free-wheeling documentary.

PHILIP LE MASURIER

Drama: *Ralph Fiennes (Oscar) and Cate Blanchett (Lucinda) confer with director Gillian Armstrong on the set of "Oscar and Lucinda."*

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Friday, Feb. 27

"AFTERGLOW"
Exclusively at the Main Art Theatre. A tale of two couples one in their 20s the other in their 40s whose troubled marriages become entwined. Stars Nick Nolte, Julie Christie.

"DANGEROUS BEAUTY"
In a world where women have few rights and are treated like property, the most captivating woman of her day dares to confront convention to become a powerful force for change.

"SWEPT FROM THE SEA"
At selected theaters. Based on short story by Joseph Conrad, an epic and tragic tale about courage, individuality and the resiliency of the human heart. Stars Vincent Perez.

"DARK CITY"
Futuristic thriller about a man who awakens in a hotel room, only to discover he is wanted for a series of murders he cannot remember.

"KRIPPENDORF'S TRIBE"
Family comedy about a widowed anthropology professor who uses grant money to raise his family, disguising his children as an "undiscovered" tribe from New Guinea. Stars Richard Dreyfuss, Lily Tomlin, Jenna Elman.

"KISSING A FOOL"
Comedy about a nervous groom-to-be who asks his best friend to court his fiancé in an attempt to test her loyalty. Stars David Schemer, Bonnie Hunt.

"CAUGHT-UP"
Drama about an ex-con struggling to leave his old life behind, only to find himself caught in a web of deceit.

Scheduled to open Friday, March 6

"THE BIG LEBOWSKI"
A Joel and Ethan Coen comic crime caper set in L.A. about a kidnapping and a case of mistaken identity. Stars Jeff Bridges, John Goodman.

"TWILIGHT"
Thriller centers around a retired Los Angeles private investigator who agrees to help out a friend, only to find himself embroiled in a dangerous and complex murder mystery. Stars Paul Newman, Susan Sarandon.

"HUSH"
Thriller about a woman who thinks she's attained the perfect life with her new husband until she finds out that her mother-in-law is not only disturbed but also dangerous. Stars Jessica Lange, Gwyneth Paltrow.

"U.S. MARSHALS"
The relentless, canny U.S. Marshal of "The Fugitive" and his street smart team are on the hunt again, this time in pursuit of a brilliant terrorist. Stars Tommy Lee Jones, Wesley Snipes.

Scheduled to open Friday, March 20

"THE NEWTON BOYS"
The true life chronicle, set in the 1920s, of the four Newton Brothers who arguably were the most prolific bank robbers in American history. Their "magnum opus" – the $3 million heist of a mail train, which was also their downfall. Stars Matthew McConaughey, Julianna Marguiles.

"WILD THINGS"
A tale of revenge, lust and murder played out in the murky swamps of the Florida Everglades and the tony yachting enclave of the Blue Bay. Passion ignites passion, mystery uncovers mystery, as the lives of four cunning characters twist and turn amid a bizarre labyrinth of truth and illusion. Stars Kevin Bacon, Matt Dillon, Bill Murray.