

AT THE MOVIES

'DATE MOVIE'

A variety of unwelcome sights (comic Eddie Griffin coughing up a hair ball) pepper this lame attempt to satirize romantic comedies ranging from "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" to "Hitch."

Alyson Hannigan (Band Girl in the "American Pie" movies) looks for romantic love after a gargantuan weight loss and a stomach-churning makeover.

Rated: PG-13. Off-color material

'EIGHT BELOW'

David Germain of the Associated Press says more face time with canines and less with humans could have saved this story of sled dogs struggling to stay alive in Antarctica after their two-legged overseers leave them behind during a killer storm.

This entertaining tale of endurance and companionship offers some glorious vistas and good action, but the filmmakers mistakenly felt they needed a strong bipedal presence.

Rated: PG

'FIREWALL'

Here's a surprise. In "Firewall," Harrison Ford plays a heroic husband who winds up saving his family from kidnapers who are trying to coerce him into helping them carry out a high-tech robbery.

Ford's character is targeted by thieves because he heads up security at a small Seattle bank.

The picture leans heavily on Ford's well-established reliability, but becomes increasingly less credible as it moves toward a predictable mano-a-mano finale.

Rated: PG-13. Violence, situations in which children are under threat

'FREEDOM LAND'

This downbeat and often disturbing adaptation of Richard Price's 1998 best seller deals with guilt, treachery and racial tensions in New Jersey.

Race becomes an issue when a distraught woman (Julianne Moore) tells a detective (Samuel L. Jackson) that her car was "jacked" by a black man and that her 4-year-old son was in the backseat.

The film's buoyed by strong performances from Jackson and Moore.

Rated: R. Profanity, violence

By JAKE COYLE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK

Out of the expansive, talented ensemble cast of Paul Haggis' "Crash," the Academy has picked Matt Dillon, the rock-jawed former teen heartthrob.

Dillon's turn as a ferociously racist cop landed the 41-year-old actor his first Oscar nomination, and at Sunday's Oscars the statuette will go to either him, George Clooney ("Syriana"), Paul Giamatti ("Cinderella Man"), Jake Gyllenhaal ("Brokeback Mountain") or William Hurt ("A History of Violence").

Nominated for six Oscars including best picture, "Crash" details the impact of racism on colliding characters in Los Angeles.

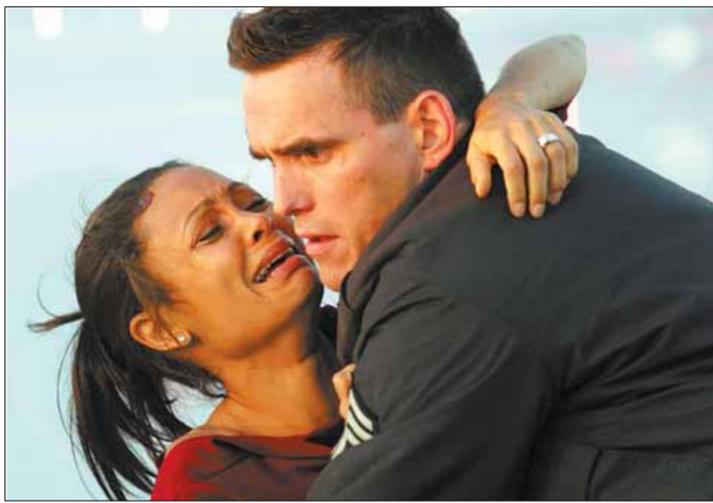
Though the cast includes Don Cheadle, Terrence Howard and Sandra Bullock, Dillon's menacing but humanistic police officer has been singled out more than any other.

After starting out in Hollywood as a teen star, Dillon expanded out of that mold beginning with Gus Van Sant's "Drugstore Cowboy" in 1989. He's since mixed dramatic roles ("To Die For," "Beautiful Girls") with comedic fare ("Singles," "There's Something About Mary.")

In August, he'll star in "Factotum," an adaptation of the Charles Bukowski novel, directed by Norwegian filmmaker Bent Hamer. Dillon plays the hard-drinking author's alter-ego, Henry Chinaski.

"Crash" is clearly a pinnacle of Dillon's career, though an unexpected one.

"It feels like it doesn't really have anything to do with me," he says, "except that



AP PHOTO

Thandie Newton, left, and Matt Dillon star in "Crash." Dillon was nominated for a best supporting-actor Oscar. Hollywood's biggest awards gala will be Sunday evening.

I just showed up."

AP: You've got to be the first actor nominated for an Oscar the same year as costarring in a movie about a living car ("Herbie: Fully Loaded").

Dillon: It's funny you should say that because I'd say at this point in my career I'm having a ball; I'm having a great time. I'm able to sit here and look at things and enjoy the surprises that come along.

If you told me a little over three years ago when "City of Ghost" (Dillon's directorial debut) premiered at Toronto, "In three years time, things will be going

great. You're going to be costarring with a Volkswagen in a movie" — I would have gotten a gun and shot myself. You just never know.

AP: A character like the one you play in "Crash" — who in one scene degrades a black couple (Howard and Thandie Newton) after pulling them over — has got to be uncomfortable to inhabit.

Dillon: That's kind of what I liked about it, though. It felt accurate to me. Now, I'm not a cop, but, in the few experiences I've had with the LAPD, these kind of aggressive police tactics were something that I recognized.

'Conviction' latest 'Law & Order' spinoff

By TERRY MORROW
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

"Conviction" (10 p.m. Friday, NBC) is a spinoff of "Law & Order," but the sexy courtroom drama from Dick Wolf bares little resemblance to any of his other legal shows.

The typical "Law & Order" series involves legal stories fondly ripped from the headlines. "Conviction" goes another route: home with the young and ambitious assistant district attorneys working in Manhattan.

It's a soap opera, but the melodramatics aren't overplayed in the opening episode. We have some bed hopping, courtroom jitters and even a murder in the office. But all the stories are tied to cases.

Wolf only takes his foray into continuing drama so far before

the script bounces back into the courtroom. It's "L.A. Law" set in Manhattan.

"Conviction" is much livelier than "Law & Order." While Wolf's aversion to lighting still makes the show literally too dark, there are moments of levity, even laughter, which is not something you get often in the grim and grueling "Law & Order" franchise.

Those are welcome moments, and they set "Conviction" apart from not only "Law & Order," but also from most other legal shows except the excellent "Boston Legal."

"Conviction" is breezier than "Law & Order," but is far from "Legal." It has the right elements to blend humor and legalese if Wolf wants to go there. Hopefully he will, because "Conviction" is still a little too stiff.

The tether within the "Law &

Order" universe is actress Stephanie March who reprises her "Special Victims Unit" role as Alexandra Cabot. She's now a bureau chief herding fresh-faced 28-year-olds who have landed their first jobs in the district attorney's office.

The new attorneys struggle not to mess up. We see the first day of newcomer Nick (Jordan Bridges), who gives up a cushy law career because he wants to try cases. Then there's Christina (Julianne Nicholson in a stand-out role), who has worked for the district attorney's office for two years and is finally getting her first trial solo.

It doesn't go well. She is humiliated when the crack dealer on the stand charms the jury with his wit. It's an especially nice scene and stands out as a signature for the series.

TAKE IT HOME ON CD

Elvis Costello (Deutsche Grammophon)

My Flame Burns Blue

Genre-crossing Elvis Costello here succeeds in mixing his serrated rock, sophisticated pop, jazz and classical pursuits on his latest album, *My Flame Burns Blue*.

The multidimensional outing was recorded in concert at The Hague in 2004 with the Metropole Orkest, Holland's famed jazz orchestra.

Costello's music ranges from the intriguingly arty "Speak Darkly, My Angel," which he penned originally for opera singer Anne Sofie von Otter, to the sparing ballad "Upon a Veil of Midnight Blue."

Ne-Yo (Def Jam)

In My Own Words

While not a complete smash, *In My Own Words* is a solid effort with some definite moments of real star power.

Among the highlights are the uptempo first single "Stay" with its infectious beat, and of course, the can't-get-it-out-of-your-head clean melody and catchy lyrics of Ne-Yo's current radio offering, "So Sick."

Another lovely song is "Time," a track where Ne-Yo uses his smooth vocal tone to chastise a man for not making his relationship enough of a priority.

Cyrus Chestnut (Telarc)

Genuine Chestnut

On *Genuine Chestnut*, Cyrus Chestnut's first CD for the Telarc label, the pianist manages to harness his eclectic influences more effectively than on past albums.

Rather than draw from the Great American Songbook for inspiration, Chestnut offers up an appealing mix of seven original compositions plus jazz interpretations of three pop tunes and a traditional hymn.

The CD opens with "The Brown Soldier," a midtempo bluesy tune with a driving rhythm that's sure to get the feet tapping. On "Ellen's Song," Chestnut mixes a ballad form with Brazilian bossa nova rhythms.

He shows himself to be exuberant rather than introspective.

• McBride

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1)

major-label contract. Her debut album of traditional country and honky-tonk tunes went nowhere fast.

McBride packed her second CD, *The Way That I Am*, with mainstream radio-accessible country-pop. The first single, "My Baby Loves Me," spiked to No. 2 on the country charts, followed by a touching story tune, "Independence Day," which has remained her signature song, and "Life No. 9," which also cracked the Top 10.

McBride's ability to turn good songs into hits made her a magnet for the best songwriters in Nashville. She's got a powerful voice and a great look, but just as importantly, McBride and her artistic team have a knack for recognizing songs that will appeal to mainstream country radio's mostly female listeners.

McBride says she doesn't intentionally record "issue" songs like "Independence Day," "Con-

crete Angel" and "A Broken Wing," but they've made her a star.

With a stack of No. 1 hits, McBride had finally earned enough power in the industry to buck the system and do something she'd always wanted.

Last year, she returned to her roots with *Timeless*, a collection of 18 of the classic country hits she grew up with. Had someone else released a CD that sounded 30 years old, it probably wouldn't have gotten a spin at Hot Country radio.

McBride's star power pushed it to No. 1.

"I just felt like I really wanted to pay tribute to songs by some of those really great artists," she says. "I see it as a tribute album."

Timeless is as much a tribute to a bygone era as it is an homage to the writers who wrote the songs and the singers who sang them.

"Basically, the whole idea of it really is that updating a (song) would be making it into something else," she says. "These songs still stand up. I thought it would be more fun to find their little nuances and pay tribute to them."

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