

Looking for Comedy in a Muslim World

Albert Brooks ("The Muse") directs, scripts and stars in this controversial comedy in which, in a bid to improve relations with Muslim countries, the U.S. government assigns him to find out what makes Muslims laugh. Brooks has accused Sony of backing out of releasing the film because he wouldn't abridge the title to read simply, "Looking for Comedy." The studio denies the allegation, saying in a statement it passed on the film based "on the merits." (Warner Independent, 2/10)

FEBRUARY 17

Eight Below

Inspired by a true story, this action-adventure set in Antarctica follows a scientific expedition that is forced to leave behind its team of beloved sled dogs after a sudden accident amid perilous weather conditions. During the harsh winter on the bottom of the world, the canines must struggle for survival alone in the intense frozen wilderness for more than half a year. Paul Walker ("Into the Blue"), Jason Biggs ("Jersey Girl") and Bruce Greenwood ("Capote") star. Frank Marshall ("Congo") directs. (Buena Vista, 2/17)

Freedomland

Julianne Moore ("The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio") stars in this dramatic thriller as a single mother of a missing child who is believed dead. She blames a black man from the projects, stirring up a racial controversy, but an African-American detective and a white newspaper reporter investigating the case discover the situation is more complicated than it first appears. Samuel L. Jackson ("The Man") and Edie Falco (TV's "The Sopranos") co-star. Revolution Studios topper Joe Roth ("Christmas With the Kranks") directs. (Sony, 2/17 NY/LA)

Second Chance

As with Sony's "The Gospel," this modestly budgeted, religiously themed drama taps into the proven lucrative grassroots faith-based demographic with a story of two pastors from very different backgrounds. White, well-to-do Ethan Jenkins is comfortable in his music ministry at media-savvy suburban megachurch The Rock, while Jake Sanders is a street-smart African-American ministering to gang members, teen mothers and drug addicts at the urban Second Chance. When the two men suddenly find themselves working together in a tough neighborhood, it's their shared faith that helps them overcome the prejudices that divide them and gives a struggling church a second chance. Michael W. Smith and Jeff Carr star. Steve Taylor directs. (Sony, 2/17)

Date Movie

Like the "Scary Movie" franchise's take on horror flicks before it, this spoof skewers romantic comedies, focusing on a man, his crush and their respective parents. "American Wedding's" Alyson Hannigan, Jennifer Coolidge and Fred Willard star with Adam Campbell. "Scary Movie" scribes Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer direct and script. (Fox, 2/17)

FEBRUARY 24

Running Scared

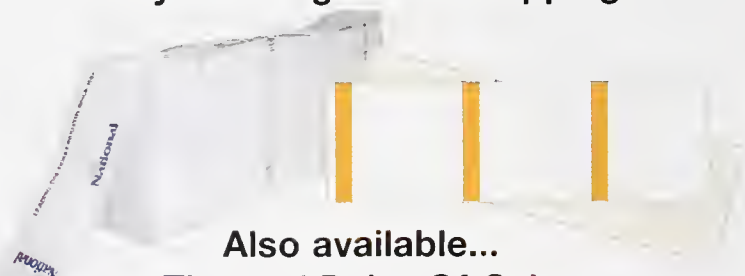
In a move to prove his range as a writer-director, Wayne Kramer follows sensitive drama (if with vicious overtones) "The Cooler" with this ultra-violent action thriller. Paul Walker ("Eight Below") stars as low-level flunkie Joey whose job it is to dispose of hot firearms that have been used in mob murders. But, instead of tossing them into the river like he's supposed to, Joey has been stashing the weapons in the drywall of his basement. When his 10-year-old son and a pal discover the cache, the friend steals a gun and uses it to kill his abusive stepfather, and Joey must recover the .38 before either his bosses or the cops find out. Cameron Bright ("Birth"), Vera Farmiga ("Down to the Bone") and Chazz Palminteri ("In the Mix") co-star. (New Line, 2/24)

Tyler Perry's Madea's Renunion

Based on writer-director-producer-star Tyler Perry's stage production, this comedy continues the adventures of southern matriarch Madea that began a year ago with "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," which

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