

# movies

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**Online Extras** Audio clips from interviews with Precious's Sapphire, Lee Daniels and Mariah Carey, Bad Lieutenant's Nicolas Cage and Werner Herzog; online-only Q&A with Ninja Assassin's Rain and more [nowtoronto.com/movies](http://nowtoronto.com/movies)



Nicolas Cage (left) and Werner Herzog prove their collaboration is no joke.

KATHRYN GAITENS

GONZO BALLET

## Cage's match

Excessive actor and legendary director find the good in Bad **By NORMAN WILNER**

**BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS** directed by Werner Herzog, written by William M. Finkelstein, with Nicolas Cage, Val Kilmer, Eva Mendes, Xzibit, Fairuza Balk and Brad Dourif. A VVS Films release. 121 minutes. Opens Friday (November 20). For venues and times, see Movies, page 87.

WHEN THE NEWS BROKE at Cannes last year that Nicolas Cage and Werner Herzog were remaking Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*, everyone thought it was a joke. But less than a year and a half later, their

movie – titled *Bad Lieutenant: Port Of Call New Orleans* – touched down in Toronto and turned into the festival's biggest surprise.

"I'm very good at casting, let's face it," Herzog says with that marvellous Bavarian accent, leaning forward on a white couch in the rooftop lounge of the Park Hyatt. There's nothing in his voice that suggests he's bragging; he's just sharing a fact.

"Actors always know that I'm good with them," he says, "and I get the most intense performances out of them that they have had

in their lives. And I think, when speaking of Nicolas Cage, where is a film where he has been better? Where is that film?"

Leaving Las Vegas, I venture. He's devastating in that. But it's a very different movie.

"Of course it is, yes," Herzog says. "But in my film he is much more multi-faceted. Leaving Las Vegas is a very, very intense performance, but doesn't have so many facets."

This is certainly true. As Terence McDonagh, Herzog's self-loathing, drug-gobbling protagonist, Cage expands and contracts himself like a cartoon accordion. It's a fully operatic performance from an actor who's spent the last decade or so going ever

bigger. And as Cage explains, he knows exactly what he's doing.

"I knew I didn't want to make a movie that resembled the original in any way," Cage says, sitting in a tented alcove about 15 feet from Herzog's couch.

"And I started to think about the humour that could come out of it, in terms of its outrageousness."

Cage plotted out what each drug would do to his character.

"The heroin was the one that would bring the voice down and slow him down, and the coke and the crack would create such a level of, like, stimulation that everything had to fly out of him," he explains, his voice growing more nasal.

"But three days of coke and no sleep would create this other sound in his voice. I've been around people who have done that, and I've seen the effects, in terms of their vocal sound with no sleep."

Cage's performance in *Bad Lieutenant* finds him riding the character's debauchery like a bronco, hanging on for dear life. But it never seems showy or overblown; somehow, Cage cracks open McDonagh's manic ferocity to reveal the broken soul within.

"To me, all film acting – really all art, on some levels – is trying to be music," he says. "Try considering film acting no differently than music or painting, where there is no top to the imagination. You can't look at Jackson Pollock and go, 'Oh, that's over the top.'"

"If the character's on drugs, you can go to another level of performance that may be considered extreme, but not if it's within the context of the director's vision. So that's the key. Can an audience go along for the ride if they sense the truth in it? If the character's high, absolutely."

This is not to say that *Bad Lieutenant* in any way endorses drug use, whether for recreation or police work.

"It was important to me that the drugs be hideous," Cage says. "There was nothing attractive about them in terms of my behaviour. Even my physicality – the facial expressions and the coke on the nose – the tics of that would be hideous." ©

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You'll feel alienated watching *Planet 51*.

## CHILDREN'S FANTASY **Planet probs**

**PLANET 51** (Jorge Blanco, Javier Abad, Marcos Martinez). 91 minutes. Opens Friday (November 20). For venues and times, see Movies, page 87. Rating: **NN**

You know you're in trouble when the backgrounds are more interesting than the characters. *Planet 51* looks lovely, a movie version of small-town America circa 1959 made alien by a visual design based on extensive and eccentric use of circles.

The characters, on the other hand, look like Dr. Seuss by way of *The Simpsons*, pleasant but nothing special, and they act like E.T. by way of every rip-off since. Specifically, teenage Lem (voiced by **Justin Long**) befriends the alien who crashes into his family barbecue. Then they run around avoiding capture by the military and trying to get the alien back to his ship before it leaves without him.

The alien is an earthling, a narcissistic NASA astronaut (**Dwayne Johnson**). The denizens of 51 are convinced he's come to eat their brains and turn them into mind-controlled zombie slaves. The 51ers are heavily influenced by their own B movies. It's the film's best joke.

The second-best joke is the creature from *Alien* reimagined as an eager little dog. It has a good scene with the astronaut's robot sidekick, also a dog, which is a cliché, but the robot dog's the movie's best-defined and most likeable character.

The explosions are nothing special, ditto the various chases. The animation is solid and conveys speed, but there's a shortage of the creative details that make action scenes fun.

Kids under 10 might be amused, but by the halfway mark, adults are likely to pass the time wishing that co-directors **Jorge Blanco, Javier Abad** and **Marcos Martinez** would let their camera linger on the backgrounds. They don't. **ANDREW DOWLER**

interview  
**Werner Herzog & Nicolas Cage**

**BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS** (Werner Herzog) Rating: **NNNN**

Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* seethed with Catholic despair as Harvey Keitel's unnamed, unmoored cop drank, drugged and gambled his way through a nightmarish New York.

Werner Herzog's new film ditches the religion but keeps the fun stuff, letting Nicolas Cage's pill-popping, coke-snorting, whoremongering Terence McDonagh stomp all over

post-Katrina New Orleans to solve the murder of a Senegalese family.

The plot's just an excuse for scene after marvellous scene of Cage's operatic madness, as his increasingly frantic lawman runs around threatening little old ladies, raiding evidence lockers and, in the movie's literal high point, hallucinating judgmental iguanas.

This may not fit everyone's concept of great filmmaking, but it's precisely what I wanted it to be. **NW**



Nicolas Cage and Eva Mendes share a rare quiet moment.

Gabourey Sidibe (left) and Mo'Nique deliver Precious memories.



# Props to Precious

## PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL "PUSH" BY SAPPHIRE

(Lee Daniels) Rating: NNNN

Fat, illiterate and pregnant by her father for the second time, 16-year-old Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) catches a break when she's sent to an alternative school so she can learn to read.

This could easily have slid into cliché – downtrodden abused child, a clutch of bad girls in the classroom – but director Lee Daniels, crafting elaborate fantasy sequences and using music to terrific effect, makes it powerful and rich.

Newcomer Sidibe is compelling as Precious, but Oscar buzz is building about Mo'Nique's amazing performance as her terrifying mom. Can you believe that Glitter star Mariah Carey appears in a gut-wrenching scene with a possible Oscar contender?

SGC

## also opening



Rain pours it on in Ninja Assassin.

Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan are my heroes. But I'm powerful, faster and younger.

online extra

Action star RAIN.

See full Q&A at

nowtoronto.com/movies.

Author Sapphire couldn't see her book as a film – until director Lee Daniels stalked her **By SUSAN G. COLE**

### PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL "PUSH" BY SAPPHIRE

directed by Lee Daniels, written by Geoffrey Fletcher, with Gabourey Sidibe, Mo'Nique, Mariah Carey and Paula Patton. A Maple release. 110 minutes. For venues and times, see Movies, page 87.

**AUTHOR SAPPHIRE'S ARM MUST BE bruised from all the times she's been pinching herself.**

Not only does the screen adaptation of her book Push hit screens this week, there she was last September next to executive producer Oprah Winfrey at the movie's rammed TIFF press conference.

A dream come true for sure, no?

"I can't say it was a dream come true because I wasn't even dreaming this big," Sapphire says in an exclusive one-on-one interview after the presser.

She's an intimidating character – striking with her shaved head, absolutely sure of her vision. And she speaks her mind, for sure.

Precious: Based On The Novel "Push" By Sapphire tracks an abused – pregnant by her father – illiterate

and obese black teen plucked out of her high school to attend the Each One Teach One remedial program, where Sapphire herself once taught. As the tragedies keep piling up, you might wonder, "What else could possibly happen to this girl?" When I describe this reaction to Sapphire, I get a near slapdown.

"Now, I just want you to reflect on who you are and your socio-economic class, because there are people who came to me and said, 'You didn't tell it like it is. It's worse than that – most people don't even get as far as she did.'"

And that's especially true today. "Every program in there that Precious encounters in 1987, including Each One Teach One and the halfway house where the older woman mentors her on childcare, were all dismantled under Clinton, who wanted to end welfare as we know it. So the safety net that was there for her, as minimal as it was, no longer exists."

Director Lee Daniels describes Sapphire as hard to get.

"I had to stalk her," he says, about his

pursuit of the rights to Push. He'd been after them since before he produced Monster's Ball.

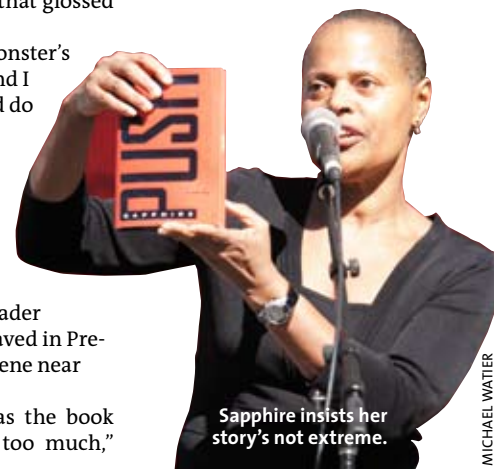
"Lee likes to joke about how long it took him to option the book," Sapphire admits later. "I just couldn't see it as a film. I didn't want Push to be a feel-good story, an educational rags-to-riches type of thing. I wanted it to show the psychological repercussions of trauma. I didn't want that glossed over."

"When I finally saw Monster's Ball, I was blown away, and I thought, 'Maybe he could do this.' And when I saw Shadowboxer [which Daniels directed], I could see how far to the edge Lee was willing to go."

Ultimately, Precious doesn't go as far as the book. Information the reader gets early on in Push is saved in Precious until a knockout scene near the end.

"To start the movie as the book does would have been too much,"

exclusive interview  
**Push author Sapphire**



Sapphire insists her story's not extreme.

MICHAEL WATNER

## Behind the big Push

Director Lee Daniels could never have put together Precious's creative team were they all not passionate fans of the book. Here's what they had to say about Push, author Sapphire and the challenge of adapting.

"This book changed my life. I read it two times immediately. The film's fantasy sequences? You needed a little bit of something that would lift you up from the depths of what the audience was going through."

**MARIAH CAREY**  
actor

"I recognize myself in that character. I have seen the Precious girls of the world, and they have been invisible to me. Now, with this book and this film, none of us can allow the Preciouses to be invisible to us again."

**OPRAH WINFREY**  
executive producer

"I believe this is a perfect book. Though it takes departures, what was important for me was that the spirit remain intact. I fell in love with the character of Precious, and I want to thank Sapphire for that."

**GEOFFREY FLETCHER**  
screenwriter

"When this book was published, it crawled under our skin. Everyone who reads this book believes there's a little bit of a Precious in all of us."

**LISA CORTES**  
executive producer

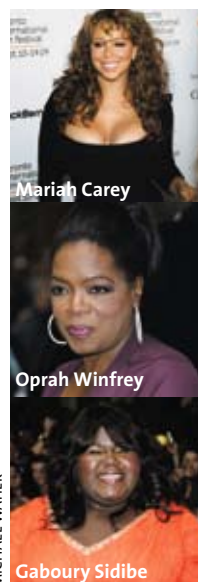
"Mariah came with zero ego – no posse. Mo'Nique was feeding people at craft services. Lenny Kravitz helped with costumes. It was a team effort, and it shows their respect for Sapphire's material."

**LEE DANIELS**  
director

"Being a fan of the book, I really wanted to get it right. I hate it when adaptations get it wrong. I knew the book has a huge following and I didn't want to hear, 'The book was better, the movie's trash.'"

**GABOURY SIDIBE**  
actor

SGC



Mariah Carey

Oprah Winfrey

Gabourey Sidibe

### Ninja Assassin (James McTeigue, 98 min)

Korean pop singer Rain stars as the titular Ninja who's intent on hammering out vengeance.



Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson bite into Twilight sequel.

### The Twilight Saga: New Moon (Chris Weitz, 130 min)

Do we really need to tell you that the sequel to the insanely popular teen vampire flick Twilight is opening this week? Either you're going or a pack of hottie werewolves couldn't drag you.



Quinton Aaron and Sandra Bullock touchdown in The Blind Side.

### The Blind Side (John Lee Hancock, 126 min)

Michael Oher, a poor, undereducated and large African-American kid (Quinton Aaron) with a talent for football, is taken in by a prosperous white family (headed by Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw) to realize his potential. Sounds like good counter-programming to New Moon.

### Old Dogs (Walt Becker, 88 min)

John Travolta and Robin Williams play friends whose lives are upended by the arrival of seven-year-old twins. Cue the hilarity!

**New Moon and Blind Side open Friday (November 20).** See reviews November 20 at nowtoronto.com/movies. **Old Dogs and Ninja open Wednesday (November 25).** See reviews in next week's paper.