

## ARTS

# Once upon a time in 18th-century Denmark

*This week's film releases  
reviewed by Jonathan  
Romney and Leslie Felperin*

Put a horse and the odd patch of grass in a film and critics will confidently declare that it is *really* a Western. But there is no doubt whatsoever that **The Promised Land** is absolutely a Western — even if it is in Danish and set in the 18th century. Nikolaj Arcel's film fits the time-honoured genre codes perfectly. Notwithstanding the occasional periwig, it resembles those epic oaters once directed by the likes of John Ford or Anthony Mann, with bursts of violence that are closer to Sam Peckinpah.

The film also has a hero in a traditional mould of implacable terseness. He is Captain Ludwig Kahlen, a historical figure, played by Mads Mikkelsen — a soldier of humble origins who petitions the Danish king to let him tame the inhospitable heathlands of Jutland. Court officials dismiss him as an upstart, but he gets permission to pursue his lone mission.

Really, the aloof, grim-faced Kahlen sees himself as alone. He has the support of a couple who have fled their abusive master and, eventually, a young Roma girl who latches on to the gruffly reluctant captain as a surrogate father.

Struggling out in the wilds, Kahlen could be a California frontiersman or a prospector panning for gold in Alaska. He is matched by another variant on an archetype — Frederik De Schinkel, a young local landowner who is this film's equivalent of an evil cattle baron. Played by Simon Bennebjerg with flamboyant, black-comedy nastiness, he is a snobbish, sadistic narcissist and the most engagingly loathsome screen villain seen in a while. The particularly refined touch of evil comes when De Schinkel doles out a horrific punishment at a soirée — but insists that a children's choir sing over the screams.

Director and co-writer Nikolaj Arcel is best known for *A Royal Affair*, another



Top: Mads Mikkelsen in 'The Promised Land'. Above: Juliette Binoche and Benoit Magimel in 'The Taste of Things'

Henrik Ohlsen, Carole Bethuel

period piece starring Mikkelsen. At the centre of his new, considerably bolder outing is the actor's variation on the rugged outdoors man who finds himself, like John Wayne in many of his roles,

eventually humanised by a woman and/or child.

The gravel-voiced Danish star makes Kahlen a stiff sobersides who is as likely to crack a soupçon of a smile as Clint Eastwood is to break into a fit of giggles. But there's nuance to his character: blinkered pride, a reckless monomania, the fragile unworldliness of a man who has only ever known the army. A lovely touch is Kahlen's awkward inability to respond to the decorous flirtation of De Schinkel's cousin and intended bride (Kristine Kujath Thorp).

Mikkelsen is beautifully complemented by newcomer Hagberg Melina, whose sparingly irreverent Anmai Mus brings warmth and spiky comedy, as well as introducing an anti-racism theme; and by Amanda Collin as the housekeeper who gradually thaws her chilly employer. Rasmus Videbæk's camerawork captures the harshness and bleak beauty of a landscape across the seasons, bringing visual sweep to an utterly satisfying old-school narrative that Hollywood today would be hard-pressed to muster. **JR**

*In cinemas now*

The marketing for the rarefied arthouse workout **Eureka** hypes the presence of movie star Viggo Mortensen (*Green Book*, *A History of Violence*) — but the Mortensen obsessives will feel they've been tricked, for he disappears after the first 20 minutes. He plays a grizzled 19th-century father, determined to rescue his runaway daughter from a near lawless town in the Wild West. And then suddenly, a visual sleight of hand shifts the focus from this black-and-white pastiche to a more realist, contemporary locale: an Indian reservation in South Dakota.

As we follow Native policewoman Alaina (Alaina Clifford) on a typical night shift, the grinding poverty, substance abuse and pervasive violence she observes start to feel as ineluctable as

'The Promised Land' resembles those epic Westerns directed by the likes of John Ford or Anthony Mann

the weather. Alaina's niece Sadie (Sadie LaPointe, heartbreaking) seeks relief from this endless cycle of despair. Her decisive act once again whisks the film off to a whole new period and place — the Amazonian rainforest in the 1970s, where jealousy and greed destabilise a

## The Promised Land

Nikolaj Arcel

★★★★★

## The Taste of Things

Tran Anh Hung

★★★★★

## Eureka

Lisandro Alonso

★★★★☆

## Bob Marley: One Love

Reinaldo Marcus Green

★★★★☆

screen provide peak thrills. The jabiru should have had top billing above Mortensen's name **LF**

*In UK cinemas now*

As the title suggests, biopic **Bob Marley: One Love** rather emphasises the beatific, don't-you-worry side of the reggae legend, rather than the rebel firebrand. Beginning in 1976, it offers an oddly structured depiction of Marley's career: with an attempt on his life, it moves forward to global superstardom, interspersed with brief flashbacks to his early years. But we don't learn much about those years. There are many figures from Marley's life represented here — including long-standing bass player Aston Barrett, who died earlier this month, and who is played by his son Aston Barrett Jr. But barely a hand-ful fully emerge as characters, and that includes Marley's early singing partners Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer, reggae legends in their own right.

What we do get is a sense of Marley's determination to bring peace to a conflict-ridden Jamaica, and of his marriage with musical partner Rita Marley. Vividly played by Lashana Lynch, she is the most powerful presence here — variously tender and fraught, her scenes with Kingsley Ben-Adir as Marley are the movie's best moments. The film is discreet about Marley's extramarital activities, the only hints given by occasional inserts of glamorous women giving him knowing looks. Notably, the producers include Rita herself and children Ziggy and Cedella Marley.

Director Reinaldo Marcus Green (*Monsters and Men*, *King Richard*) applies considerable seriousness to his depiction, which conjures up a plausible feel of the 1970s, in Jamaica and Europe alike. But the result is earnest and a little flat — and occasionally clunky in a showbiz-story way, as when the song "Exodus" magically emerges from an impromptu jam after Marley hears the theme tune from the Hollywood film of

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Overall, Ben-Adir evokes a careworn gentleness without quite mustering the weathered geniality of the original, seen in archive footage at the very end; what he does impressively capture, though, is Marley’s exalted animation onstage. In the film’s favour is its refusal to compromise on its sometimes thorny Jamaican Patois for global appeal. It hasn’t always been the case with reggae films, but this time *Babylon* will just have to get by without subtitles. **JR**  
*In cinemas now*

the weather. Alaina’s niece Sadie (Sadie LaPointe, heartbreaking) seeks relief from this endless cycle of despair. Her decisive act once again whisks the film off to a whole new period and place — the Amazonian rainforest in the 1970s, where jealousy and greed destabilise a small community.  
Argentine director Lisandro Alonso stitches Indigenous stories and experiences across centuries and continents to create a mystical Möbius strip of a film. The ambition impresses, but viewers will need to be slow-cinema devotees to endure the minutes-long takes of people doing not very much at all — walking, sitting, driving, dying and so on. Moments where a massive, computer-generated jabiru — a South American stork that’s black and white and red through the middle — ambles across the



Left: Adanilo R. in ‘Eureka’, which stitches together Indigenous stories and experiences. Below: Kingsley Ben-Adir and Lashana Lynch in the biopic ‘Bob Marley: One Love’  
Chiabella James



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In the old days, there weren’t that many movies about food, apart from the occasional grand cinematic tasting menu, such as *Babette’s Feast* or *Big Night*. But just as there’s been explosive growth in food culture, there’s been a glut of food-related films and TV, enough to populate several Netflix subcategories and even spawn a backlash movie: last year’s acidic satire of fine dining, *The Menu*. In that context, *The Taste of Things* feels like a return to the very best kind of comfort viewing, a work that nourishes the soul and whets the appetite but without the sprinkling of irony.

Director Tran Anh Hung (*The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Norwegian Wood*) has always been a connoisseur of craftsmanship. His miniaturist’s attention to detail gets a dazzling workout in *The Taste of Things’* opening 40 minutes. The sequence takes place in a chateau’s cellar-kitchen, circa 1889, a sunlit space full of glinting, ringing copper pans. Gifted chef Eugénie (Juliette Binoche) prepares a multi-course feast that includes a rack of veal, roast fish, quenelles, a vol-au-vent and one of those newfangled desserts, an *omelette norvégienne* — what Anglophones call a baked Alaska — among other treats.

It’s all for her employer-lover Dodin Bouffant (Benoît Magimel, once Binoche’s life partner, playing opposite her for the first time in years) and his coterie of gentlemen friends in the chateau’s dining room upstairs. Eugénie insists on eating downstairs with the scullery maid, despite the gentlemen’s pleas that she join them upstairs. All the guests are epicures, but Dodin is the one most famous for his taste, known nationwide as the “Napoleon of the culinary arts”. Eugénie is more than just his Josephine. Their relationship in the kitchen is that of equal collaborators, mutually admiring of each other’s palates and talents.

Upstairs in Eugénie’s attic bedroom, things are a little more complicated. Dodin would like to marry her but she doesn’t quite see the point of matrimony. Just when she consents to give him her hand, she grows ill with one of those mysterious 19th-century maladies. Dodin must cook for her. Food is their love language but this intimate drama becomes a lens through which Tran also explores food history and fashions, the subtle politics of domestic service, the graceful beauty of middle-aged love. All of it permeates every impeccably performed and composed frame of this considered and strangely profound film. Like a great wine, *The Taste of Things* has a long, lingering finish. **LF**

*In US and UK cinemas now*