

*VARIETY*

# International Film Guide 2004

THE ULTIMATE ANNUAL REVIEW OF WORLD CINEMA

edited by DANIEL ROSENTHAL



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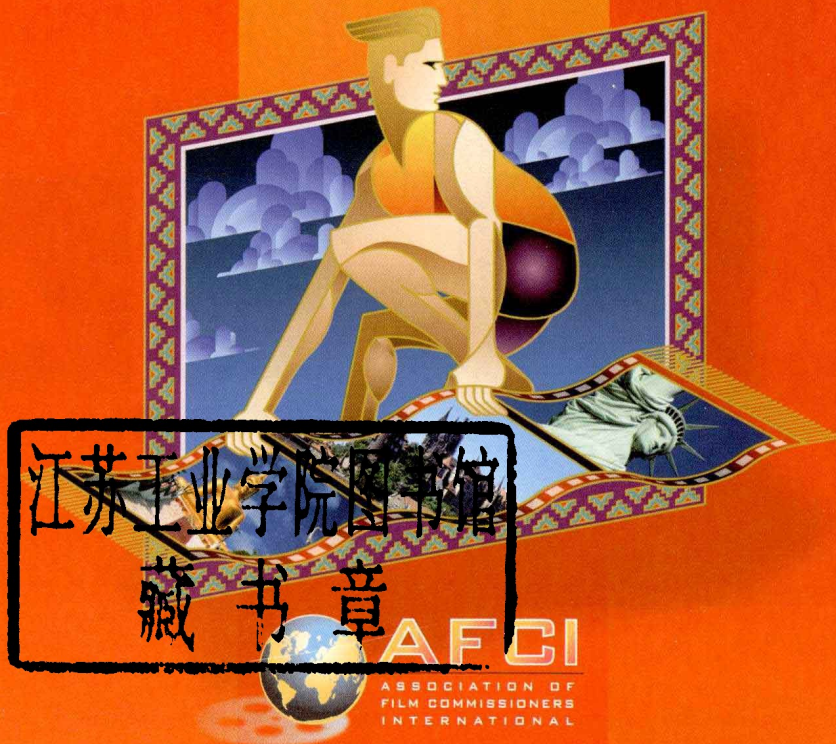
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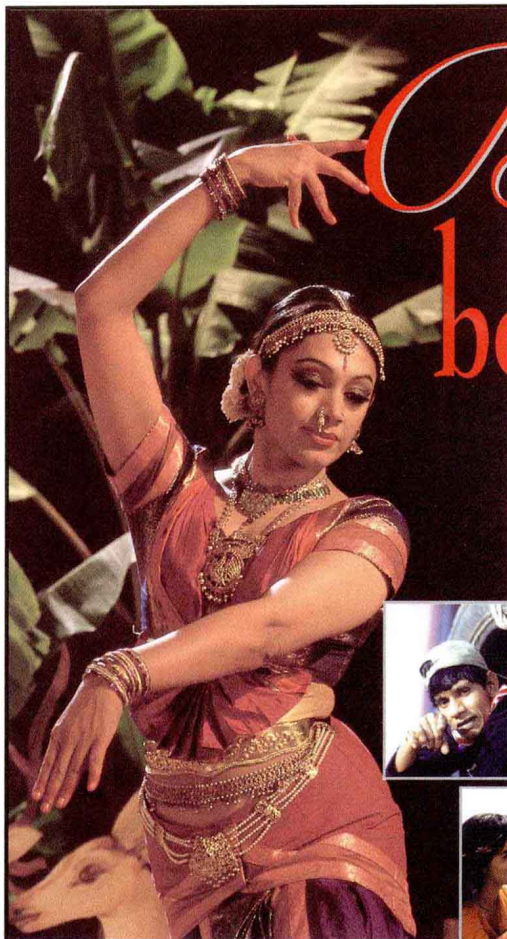
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*VARIETY*

# **International Film Guide 2004**

**THE ULTIMATE ANNUAL REVIEW OF WORLD CINEMA**

**edited by DANIEL ROSENTHAL**

**founding editor PETER COWIE**

**VIRGIN BOOKS**

LONDON

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tel +44 (0) 20 7624 3300

**Editorial and Business Offices***Button Publishing*

246 Westminster Bridge Road

London SE1 7PD

tel +44 (0) 20 7401 0410

fax +44 (0) 20 7401 0249

e info@buttonpublishing.com

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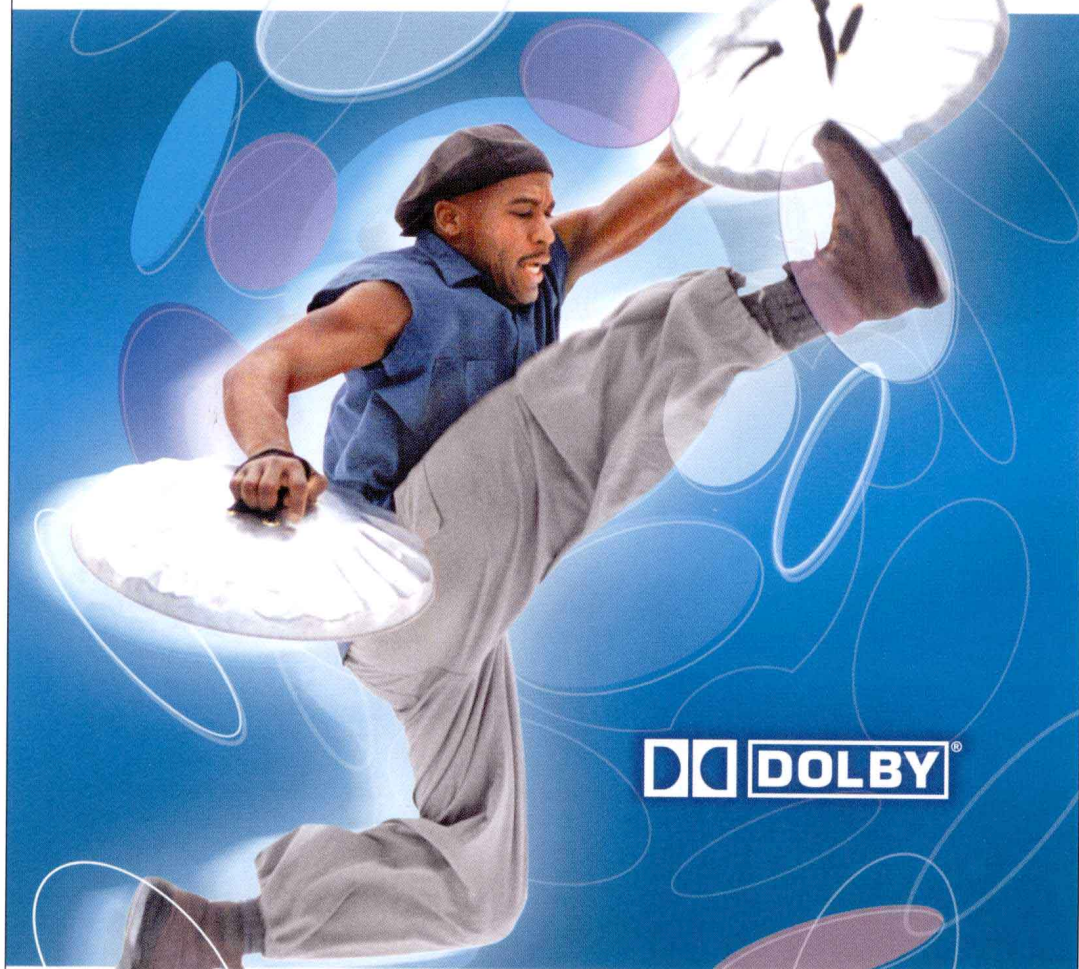
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Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (Paramount/Miramax/Kobal/Clive Coote); Zhang Ziyi in *Hero* (Beijing New Picture Film Co./Miramax/Kobal); Douglas Silva in *City of God* (Globo Filmes/Kobal); Oksana Akinshina, left, and Elina Benenson in *Lilya 4-ever* (Memfis Film/Per-Anders Jørgensen); Chiwetel Ejiofor in *Dirty Pretty Things* (BBC/Celador Productions/Kobal); Daniel Brühl in *Good Bye, Lenin!* (X Filme Creative Pool). All images on p.321 appear courtesy of the Kobal Collection.

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## Notes from the Editor

Waiting to go into a screening at the Cinemaxx theatre during the Berlin Film Festival in February 2003, my eye was drawn to the monitors behind the box-office counter, which were relaying fuzzy, black-and-white pictures of the movies playing in the auditoria. I could make out what looked like a Latin American street scene, a pair of European lovers and an Asian family, and was struck by how different those screens must look for the 50 weeks of the year when the festival is not in town: filled with Hollywood imports and one or two mainstream local titles, just like thousands of other multiplexes the world over.

That contrast seemed as good a visual metaphor as any for *IFG's* approach to film. For the first 40 years of its life, under founding editor Peter Cowie, this book has been committed to recording, criticising and celebrating the Babel-like diversity of film-making, not just the movies that emerge from LA, and that focus is unchanged in this 41st edition, my first as editor.

As ever, our World Survey reflects the ebb and flow in the fortunes of more than 70 national film industries. In China, independent producers are emerging as a major force. In Azerbaijan and Belarus, the governments have responded to intense lobbying from film-makers for state support. Norway's feature output is on course to double, while Slovenia's directors hope that the country's entry into the EU in 2004 will bring instant access to much-needed subsidies.

Elsewhere, the outlook is bleaker. Directors in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still obliged to import 35mm camera equipment at absurd cost. Producers in Pakistan will take time to recover from the closure of the 30-year-old National Film Development Corporation. Full-length scripts in Puerto Rico are confined exclusively to television.



Daniel Rosenthal

This year's reports also remind us that censorship still poses a clear and present danger to creative freedoms. It is most evident in our dossier on Iran, some of whose directors risk imprisonment or exile to show their work uncut, and has reared its head in Mexico, where Catholic leaders tried and failed to ban the sight of a priest in love in *The Crime of Father Amaro*, and in Chile, where audiences were finally permitted to watch Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Our correspondents also highlight cinema's undimmed power to stir debate on key figures and incidents in a nation's history. Gregor Jordan's *Ned Kelly* had Australians arguing over the iconic status of their most famous outlaw. Atom Egoyan's account of the Armenian genocide, *Ararat*, became a huge talking point – and commercial hit – in Armenia. Most remarkably of all, Estonia's *Names in Marble*, the story of young volunteers' courage in the 1918 war of independence, surpassed *Titanic* as the country's all-time box-office champion.

Public attitudes to recent or contemporary events were also challenged by two of our





Total HelpArt

Jan Hřebejk's *Pupendo*: acclaim and a mass audience

Directors of the Year: Jan Hřebejk's *Pupendo* encouraged a generation of Czechs to re-examine their behaviour under communism in the 1980s and Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya 4-ever* spurred Swedes to address the suffering of child prostitutes. Both also pulled off a hat-trick achieved by a very select band: winning acclaim from national and international critics and attracting a mass audience at home.

The exceptional nature of such successes is confirmed by our annual World Box-Office Survey, as Hollywood's dominance continues unopposed in too many territories. Some do manage to buck the trend, notably South Korea, where increasingly slick commercial film-making is supported by a screen quota system, and Serbia and Montenegro, whose cinemagoers devour homegrown stories that yoke domestic concerns to Hollywood genre conventions. In Bulgaria, Croatia, Portugal and Taiwan, however, local features account for no more than 2% of ticket sales, and in English-speaking markets like Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the battle against the American studios is only marginally less one-sided.

Most British films also struggle to find an audience at home, and the celebration of revenue over content grows daily, with Hollywood titles marketed to UK audiences largely on the strength of their chart triumph in the US. "Jim Carrey's highest-ever opening weekend comedy gross!" hollered print ads for *Bruce Almighty* in June 2003 – not in the trade

press, but in tabloids like the *Sun* and *Evening Standard*.

As another blockbuster season ended with *Pirates of the Caribbean* heading for a global gross of \$600m-plus, it would be heartening to think that producer Jerry Bruckheimer's essentially old-fashioned romp – no masterpiece, but at least enjoyable and inoffensive – had vastly exceeded studio expectations because it drew such positive word-of-mouth from the legions who felt short-changed by *The Hulk* and the *Charlie's Angels* and *Tomb Raider* sequels, or the tedious, hollow *Matrix Reloaded*. Might *Pirates* signal the start of an anti-CGI backlash?

UK distributors concerned by the dearth of popular local features are at least seeing signs of a renewed interest in foreign-language fare. If films as diverse as *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *Belleville Rendez-vous* and *Etre et avoir* can break into the British box-office Top 15 in one three-month period, as they did in summer 2003, and if French-owned UGC Cinemas, the one multiplex chain in Britain that consistently programmes specialised titles, can see its Glasgow site generate a remarkable 33% of its business from arthouse films, then for those dedicated to cinematic plurality the news cannot all be bad.

The vagaries of corporate takeovers and fickle culture ministries – not to mention audiences – may mean that the coming year reverses some or all of these trends. Whatever happens, *IFG* and its correspondents will continue to track every new development with inquisitive enthusiasm.

– Daniel Rosenthal



Elliot Marks/Disney/Jerry Bruckheimer Inc.

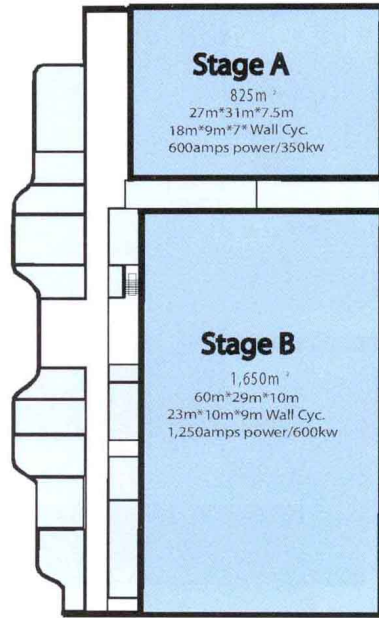
*Pirates of the Caribbean*: start of a blockbuster backlash?



Columbia/Marvel/Zade Rosenbalk/Kobal

Comic-book adaptation **Spider-Man** was the biggest hit of 2002, grossing \$821m, but even that vast sum was dwarfed by the combined takes for the first two *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* films. World Box-Office Survey begins on p.321.

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## Directors of the Year

## Christopher Guest by Eddie Cockrell



Columbia/Drama Newcomb/Kobal

Plug the name “Christopher Guest” into the search engine of the Internet Movie Database, and you’ll find on his extensive filmography page a photo of Nigel Tufnel, the sincere yet clueless lead guitarist he played in director Rob Reiner’s landmark and largely improvised 1984 independent film *This Is Spinal Tap*. While certainly Guest’s most popular and enduring characterisation – and supremely emblematic of his brand of underdog comedy, which treats passionate eccentrics with mischievous dignity – Nigel is only the tip of the iceberg in a prolific career that has spanned some 35 years and every contemporary artistic medium.

Writer, actor, composer, arranger, comedian, director: from live theatre through the glory days of the *National Lampoon* humour machine, from early bit parts in movies through tentative steps behind the camera and the triumphant improvisational troika of *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind* – three films in six years which herald something genuinely new and exciting in American film comedy – Guest’s oeuvre has a conceptual continuity worthy of Coleridge or Zappa, and reveals a determined, perceptive and canny Renaissance man who respects and honours the foibles of

entertainment history, even as he re-imagines the very nature of the creative process.

CHRISTOPHER HADEN-GUEST was born into aristocracy on February 5, 1948, in New York City. His father was Lord Peter Haden-Guest, a card-carrying member of the British House of Lords who’d been a ballet dancer and a publications editor at the United Nations; and his mother, Lady Jean Haden-Guest, was Jean Hindes, who subsequently served as vice-president of CBS from 1976 to 1986. Guest studied music, art and drama from an early age, and a trip to England as a teenager brought him work at the BBC and exposure to the comedy of, among others, Peter Sellers.

Back Stateside, he did time at Bard College and the New York University School of the Arts before embarking on a career that could easily fill an essay twice this length. Highlights include a handful of Broadway shows; spot-on musical spoofs and groundbreaking comedy material for nearly 60 episodes of *The National Lampoon Radio Hour*; a Best Musical Score Obie nomination for his work on *National Lampoon’s Lemmings* (an irreverent and hugely influential musical revue that re-imagined Woodstock as a mass suicide set to music); five *NatLamp*-branded record albums of topical sketches and musical spoofs; an Emmy for co-writing Lily Tomlin’s 1975 ABC TV special; and a player on ABC’s short-lived variety series *Saturday Night with Howard Cosell* (NBC’s rival Saturday variety show became *Saturday Night Live* and featured Guest in 1984-85).

It was during this time that he met and befriended future collaborators Michael McKean (with whom he’d write spoofs of folk and rock songs) and Fred Willard. In 1977, Guest was hired to play the college roommate of Michael



"Meathead" Stivic (Rob Reiner), son-in-law of outspoken bigot Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) on the TV sitcom *All in the Family*, which led to a friendship that endures today (Guest's three most recent improvisational films were bankrolled by Castle Rock Entertainment, of which Reiner is a founding partner). Throughout his career, Guest has consistently returned to collaborations with friends. "We're not faking a friendship," he told the *New Zealand Herald* in July 2003 of his 35 years with McKean and 28 with Spinal Tap bassist Harry Shearer.

A decade of small- to medium-sized roles in Hollywood films ran parallel to these other projects: uncredited as a resident in Arthur Hiller's *The Hospital* (1971); a young policeman in both Peter Yates' *The Hot Rock* (1972) and Michael Winner's *Death Wish* (1974); the "Boy Lover" in Mike Nichols' *The Fortune* (1975); in support of future collaborator Bob Balaban in Claudia Weill's charming *Girlfriends* (1978); Jeb Stuart Magruder in the mini-series *Blind Ambition* (1979), about Nixon's downfall; treacherous real-life outlaw Charlie Ford, to his brother Nicholas' Bob Ford in Walter Hill's bloody Western siblingfest *The Long Riders* (1980); supporting Andy Kaufman in Allan Arkush's mawkish misfire *Heartbeeps* (1981). Of this dramatic urge, Guest told Nitrate Online in October 2000: "I like acting... I wouldn't even mind being on a TV show. Not as the main lead, but as the guy who comes in from next door every once in a while, does his little thing, and then leaves."

### A style is born

After working again with Reiner on the largely forgettable 1982 TV movie *Million Dollar Infield*, Spinal Tap was born. The saga of two long-time British chums (Guest and McKean) whose heavy metal band is falling apart during a disastrous American tour, the film has become a touchstone of self-reflexive, contemporary pop culture comedy on the basis of its two chief strengths: the authentic musicianship of the fictitious band (Guest, McKean, Shearer and a revolving series of doomed drummers) and

the obvious improvisational nature of every scene (Guest calls it "riffing", after the spontaneous creative process of the classic screen comedians).

Post-*Tap*, Guest worked on SNL, other TV collaborations with gifted comedians Martin Short and Billy Crystal (who'd been in *Tap*); modest but distinctive parts in Frank Marshall's jaunty *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), Robert Altman's weird *Beyond Therapy* (1987) and a pair of Reiner movies (Guest played the fiendish Count Rugen in 1987's cherished, though overpraised fairy tale parody *The Princess Bride* and the intense Dr Stone in a single, vivid scene in 1992's *A Few Good Men*). There's more – lots more – suggesting Guest was soaking up the moviemaking atmosphere, looking for a way to blend his still-nascent collaborative creative process with the strict demands of Hollywood.

After honing his technical skills as a director on some fondly remembered but relatively obscure TV shows (*Morton & Hayes*, and the fairytales of Shelley Duvall's *Tall Tales and Legends*), Guest made his feature directing debut with the genial Hollywood satire *The Big Picture* (1989), starring Kevin Bacon as an award-winning film student determined to make a studio picture by playing the Hollywood game. Both it and the subsequent 1993 HBO production *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman* (an off-kilter though respectful



Michael McKean, left, and Kevin Bacon in *The Big Picture*

remake of Nathan Juran's cheesy 1958 sci-fi chestnut that sees Daryl Hannah grow to take revenge on cloddish husband Daniel Baldwin) display a disarming sincerity in place of the expected irony, as well as a heartfelt appreciation for those toiling on the margins of showbusiness.



Turner Pictures/Dana Neucomb/Kobal

Chris Farley and Matthew Perry in *Almost Heroes*

Guest's only later directorial effort outside the improvised trilogy is *Almost Heroes* (1998), a funny enough spoof of the Lewis and Clark expedition that suffers from being the film that SNL star-turned-Hollywood-comedian Chris Farley had just completed when he died of a drug overdose at 33 (emulating the premature end of Guest's former *NatLamp* collaborator John Belushi). That tragedy aside, there's a vaudevillian exuberance to the proceedings, even as Guest seems to chafe under the restrictions of scripted comedy – no matter how broadly and skilfully it's acted. "I liked the script," Guest told Nitrates Online. "The movie just didn't work. You never know what's going to work."

### Am dram thank you ma'am

By the mid-1990s, Guest was kicking around ideas with Canadian-born actor-writer Eugene Levy, veteran of the legendary SCTV comedy troupe (which also included John Candy and Catherine O'Hara) and a high-profile character actor in such contemporary fare as the

*American Pie* films (he plays Jim's Dad). They settled on a *Tap*-like, improvisatory approach that balances the risks of the unknown with the rewards of fresh, uncharted comedic results.

Their first collaboration, *Waiting for Guffman* (1997), established the template for their experiment (don't call it a "mockumentary", Guest is said to hate the word). In the small town of Blaine, Missouri, Broadway refugee Corky St Claire (Guest, riffing on gay characters he'd played on radio and SNL) rallies a fairly untalented but enthusiastic gaggle of townspeople to perform a sesquicentennial tribute to their burg, known heretofore as the stool capital of the world (footrests, not the other kind). As the company gets wind that Guffman will be scouting the play for possible Broadway relocation, the pressures mount. The remarkable thing about the film is how rich and self-assured it is: 60 hours of Super-16 footage edited down over a year and a half, with songs by the same Guest-McKean-Shearer team that wrote the Spinal Tap music (mind-bendingly, the climactic "Red, White and Blaine" revue was the only part of the film actually rehearsed in advance).

### A pet project

After *Almost Heroes*, Guest reassembled the *Guffman* cast, with a few new additions, for *Best in Show* (2000). The episodic story of owners preparing their pets for a breed showcase took



Columbia/Suzanne Tenner/Kobal

Guest as Corky St. Claire in *Waiting for Guffman*



eight months to edit from the 60 hours of footage captured during a five-week shoot. By now, the improvisation was “almost a live television technique”, Guest told the BBC. “I had a microphone to talk with the cameraman. It was all hand-held and I actually told him who to focus on... I could hear a joke developing. It was exciting because it happened right then.”

How, precisely, does the preparation for this kind of comedy work? Here's Guest himself, talking with Levy on the Region 1 *Best in Show* DVD: “Eugene and I sit for many months to work out the story, which has a beginning, a middle and an end... All the scenes are delineated, are on cards, everything tracks, everyone has to know who they are in relation to the other people. The difference is there's no dialogue written... Things can change in the beginning of the movie, [but] once you get into the story it becomes so intricately constructed that you can't just move anything around because it will impact something else... once people are on the road to go to the show, you're following the map that you've laid out. Which is the most important thing in a film where there's no dialogue written, because the actors need... to have a basis of reality that you can improvise from.”



Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara in *Best in Show*

Guest has gathered a group of actors willing and able to work in this way. In addition to Guest and Levy and old friends McKean and Willard, the core company includes Balaban, Michael Hitchcock, Catherine O'Hara and Parker Posey. Since *Guffman*, new recruits have included Ed Begley Jr, Jennifer Coolidge,

John Michael Higgins, Jane Lynch and Jim Piddock. Able support is provided by instantly recognisable character actors such as Shearer, Lewis Arquette, Paul Benedict, Paul Dooley, Brian Doyle-Murray and Deborah Theaker. And there's one actor, Scott Williamson, who seems to have a bit part in just about everything Guest's directed. This is certainly the freshest group of comedy performers since Preston Sturges' 1940s heyday (tellingly, Guest and McKean were featured on the 2001 Criterion DVD commentary track of Sturges' immortal *Sullivan's Travels*).

### Songs with the Wind

*A Mighty Wind* (2003) takes the concept to new levels. Following the death of legendary concert promoter Irving Steinbloom, beloved 1960s acoustic trio The Folksmen (Guest, McKean and Shearer, reviving an act they'd first tried out on TV in the mid-1980s) agree to join acoustic conglomerate The New Main Street Singers and estranged romantic duo Mitch & Mickey (Levy and O'Hara) in a memorial concert at New York City's Town Hall. The road to revival is, of course, a bumpy one.

The film is an extraordinary piece of work, with a level of cultural ephemera (fictitious album covers, that sort of thing) and dramatic substance (Levy and O'Hara shine) new to the form. All three of these modest yet groundbreaking films are available on DVD, with enough bonus material to give fans a vivid glimpse into Guest's painstaking methodology and the conceptual continuity that finds characters, situations, clues and trivia scattered from one work to the next.

If there's a flaw to this technique, it's in the rhythm, and this is particularly noticeable during *Best in Show*. Many sequences begin with fairly normal interview situations, then spiral into bizarre verbal riffing that stops the flow dead rather than advances the narrative. That this flaw is largely absent in *A Mighty Wind* is further testament to the strength of the story and everyone's comfort level with the non-stop improvisation.

Castle Rock/Duarte Gregory/Kobal