

Samba! ***½

The history, politics and execution of the "biggest popular celebration in the world" get complete illumination in Adam Stepan's behind-the-scenes look at Rio de Janeiro's annual carnival. A rich cast of players and even richer array of costumes, music and choreography are central to preparing for a pre-Lenten event with 4,000 artists from samba schools vying for the coveted trophy. Like so much else, the competition has become more corporate and frenetic over the years; precious archival footage shows a slower, deeper groove. With English subtitles at Ex-Centris today at 11:15 a.m., tomorrow at 5:15 p.m. and Saturday at 1:30 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Smiley Face ***

Gregg Araki's bright shiny penny of a stoner comedy stars goofy Anna Faris as a card-carrying L.A. pothead and low-grade actress who begins her boned day by mistakenly scarfing her flatmate's sacred cupcakes. Comprehensively baked, she must now negotiate an acting audition, the rent, paying her dealer and an electrical bill, a cross-town mission and the reconstruction of those weed-loaded cupcakes. For heaviosity master Araki, this is a day at the beach. At the Imperial tomorrow at 1:30 p.m. and Sunday at 7:30 p.m., and at Ex-Centris Monday at 11:15 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Lynch ****½

How better to direct a profile of iconoclastic artist David Lynch than as a David Lynch film? The collective black-and-white employs black and white film, decayed stock, and the imaginative use of time and space to paint the most reveal-

ing portrait to date of the great American filmmaker; artist, lifestyle surrealist, enthusiastic smoker and proponent of transcendental meditation. Set around preparations for Lynch's mind-messing 2006 movie *Inland Empire*, it also ties in his growing commitment to the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-based Education and World Peace. For fans, unmissable. At Ex-Centris Sunday at 9:15 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

American Venus ***

Rebecca De Mornay is an obsessive American figure-skating coach, gun enthusiast and clingy mother who travels across the Canadian border at Vancouver after her daughter (Jane McGregor), who has wisely fled the nest after too many years of failing to live up to Mom's demands on the ice. Bruce Sweeney's domestic drama plays like a movie-of-the-week for grown-ups, and hinges on the shaky notion that some people love firearms more than common sense. The leads, however, are terrific. At the Imperial Monday at 5:30 p.m. and Tuesday at 3:30 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Second Sight ****

Alison McAlpine's glorious hour-long tribute to the great characters and laid-back way of life on the remote Scottish Isle of Skye has a misty-twisty Gaelic quality uniquely appropriate to the subject of ghosts. Thanks to introductions by vital 80-year-old Donald Angus MacLean, we meet a group of individuals who claim to have had personal contact with those beyond the pale. One look at the rugged terrain, breathtaking ocean vistas and ancient hills and fields, and you are likely to believe them. In English and Gaelic with French subtitles at Ex-Centris Saturday at 9:20 p.m. and Sunday at 3:20 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Ulzhan ***

How well Volker Schlöndorff's moody, entirely unlikely exercise in self-pity disguised as grief works for you depends on your appetite for extreme and exotic landscapes. A Frenchman lost in some kind of family grief travels to Kazakhstan, unloads his belongings and starts walking, then riding, across the astonishing steppes of Central Asia. Though the place is large and quite empty, he continually runs across two characters who both speak French. One is, typically, a trickster shaman of sorts, the other a

local teacher of indescribable beauty. Sadly, neither lifts his glum-chum spirits for long. This gets stars for nature, not for acting. With English subtitles at Ex-Centris Monday at 1 p.m. and the Imperial Tuesday at 9:30 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Young People F--king **½

Despite a racy title, theoretically controversial subject matter, some strong ensemble acting and sparkling dialogue, Martin Gero's carnal comedy about five Toronto couples engaged in the act of amour reads like the *Canuck* pilot for a *Sex and the City* replacement. This isn't necessarily a bad thing - cable pays the bills and wins Grammys - but it was billed as scandalous when it opened the Canadian segment of the Toronto International Film Festival last month. It's as dangerous as processed cheese. At the

Daisy Diamond ****½

The most profoundly disturbing, moving film I've seen in this year's lineup to date is a complex Danish drama about a young woman living with a terrible secret. Noomi Rapace is fearless and astonishing as an aspiring actress and single mother with a difficult newborn whose crying and reluctance to sleep or eat cause her to fail auditions, get behind on the rent and generally lose her mind. Rapace offers a master class in a film that wades into dark, degrading areas of violence, sexual control and perversion while carving the acting profession a new orifice. This isn't easy viewing, because you'll never forget it. With English subtitles at Ex-Centris Monday at 9:45 p.m. and Oct. 18 at 3:15 p.m.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Deficit **½

Actor Gael Garcia Bernal's first attempt at directing uses a rich kid's house party to explore class and societal divisions in Mexico. Bernal plays Cristobal, the son of a former bureaucrat being investigated for corruption, who hosts a party at his parents' country house. Like Renoir's *Rules of the Game* or Altman's *Gosford Park*, *Deficit* lets the social commentary reveal itself in a natural, unpretentious way. But the characters, all acted by relative unknowns, aren't served well by a script that leaves everyone too sketchily delineated for us to really care about. Bernal, who had the idea that served as the basis for the script, works well with actors. It would be interesting to see what he can do next time with someone else's - hopefully better - material. In Spanish with French subtitles, at Ex-Centris tomorrow at 1 p.m., and at the Imperial Tuesday at 8 p.m., Wednesday at 5:30 p.m.

MARK TREMBLAY