SHOTS FIRED tackles multiple hot-button issues

INTO THE BADLANDS
How fatherhood changes Sunny in Season 2

DANCING WITH THE STARS
One past finalist’s insider’s view

THE AMERICANS
head toward the finish line

Courtesy of Gracenote March 19 - 25, 2017
Southern-town shooting incidents that apparently are racially motivated propel the limited drama series “Shots Fired,” premiering Wednesday on Fox. Creators and executive producers Gina Prince-Bythewood and Reggie Rock Bythewood, and stars including Oscar winners Richard Dreyfuss and Helen Hunt, tell Jay Bobbin about the show.

As “Dancing With the Stars” begins its 24th round Monday on ABC, one of last season’s finalists — actress and country-music star Jana Kramer — talks with Jay Bobbin about the experience of being in, and staying in, the competition almost to the end.

In Season 2 of the martial arts drama “Into the Badlands,” warrior Sunny is incarcerated in a mining prison, struggling to survive its brutality and determined to get back to the Badlands and his family. The actor who plays Sunny, Daniel Wu, tells George Dickie of the physical demands the prison scenes exacted from him.

Season 5 of FX’s “The Americans” continues with an eye toward its end game, since next year will mark the conclusion of the Tuesday drama series. Stars Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys and executive producer Joel Fields tell Jay Bobbin about staying in the present with their work on the show while thoughts of the impending finale hover.

Reese Witherspoon supports actresses’ solidarity in ‘Big Little Lies’

Why Dr. Pol is wary of the unsocialized dog

How Keeley Hawes got through playing the mother of an abductee

‘Empire’ Rumer Willis doesn’t let herself get comfortable

All about Calista Flockhart of ‘Supergirl’

What’s for dinner? It’s on YouTube

‘Home Town’ Mississippi couple takes pride in their community and its homes

NASCAR heads to the Southwest

Theatrical Review, and Our top DVD releases

Our top suggested programs to watch this week!
Many television programs like to tout themselves as “timely,” but there’s no question that “Shots Fired” truly is.

Premiering Wednesday, March 22, the limited-run Fox drama series – created and executive-produced by filmmaking spouses Gina Prince-Bythewood (“Love & Basketball”) and Reggie Rock Bythewood (“Notorious”) – focuses on two murders in a North Carolina town that seem racially motivated, with one victim black and the other white. An investigator and a special prosecutor (played by Sanaa Lathan and Stephan James) lead a probe for the Department of Justice, eventually suspecting power brokers including the state’s re-election-minded governor (Oscar- and Emmy-winning actress and director Helen Hunt) of a cover-up.

Also factoring into the story in major ways: a sheriff (Will Patton); one of his deputies (actor-singer Mack Wilds, who was Tristan Wilds on “The Wire” and “90210”), who committed one of the shootings; the mother (Jill Hennessy) of the teen he killed; another local police veteran (“True Blood” alum Stephen Moyer); a pastor (Aisha Hinds); and a real-estate tycoon (Richard Dreyfuss, another Oscar owner) who also operates a privatized prison. Ron Howard and Brian Grazer’s Imagine Entertainment also is a production entity on the weekly 10-hour saga.

Though Reggie Rock Bythewood allows that events in Ferguson, Mo., were touchstones for “Shots Fired” as he and his wife mapped out the drama, he says, “We looked at various sorts of small Southern towns, and for many reasons, North Carolina just seemed to work well. It really rocked us in many ways when all the protests and all the sort of things that happened in Charlotte (occurred), watching it on TV and seeing some of the places where we shot, where a lot of the protests and various troubles were going on.”

Co-star Dreyfuss adds, “We didn’t have to look into a crystal ball and know that something was going to happen in that town. It’s happening. It’s happening all over. We shot probably the most current show you’ll ever see. It’s exactly current with the world. It was Reggie supporting the script and talking to me about it that sold me, and then the world followed. As you watch this show, you’re going to be reminded very clearly of the most current headlines in your life. This is America.”

Still, Gina Prince-Bythewood maintains, “We knew the story we wanted to tell. We knew what we wanted to deal with. For us, it’s about speaking to the truth, and we wanted to know the best way to do that.

“It’s very easy for people to watch the news and see a piece about a shooting, and if you don’t identify with who’s on the screen, you turn it off ... so we felt the best way to address this issue, and to get people who don’t normally go through this issue to understand, was to give them a way to understand. In flipping the narrative, it allows folks who don’t normally identify with characters to empathize with them. And through empathy, you can change.”

Hunt’s own experiences and awareness informed her desire to be a part of the “Shots Fired” cast. She reflects, “While many politicians I have kept at arm’s length I hold responsible for the criminal-justice system and the way it is, some of the politicians I voted for were complicit as well, so we sort of got interested in turning this governor into somebody who would be somebody I might vote for – and yet, she’s behaving in ways that if we look more closely, we might feel uncomfortable with. And ‘uncomfortable’ is really good when you’re trying to make drama.”
What was your aim in producing, as well as starring in, “Big Little Lies”?
The constant sort of question for me is, how am I discovering something about a woman on film that I’ve never seen before? And how am I creating something that hasn’t been done before? With this piece, I feel like it was such a unique opportunity to have women of every age, every color talking about motherhood ... and that is sort of a common denominator.
Parenthood is a great equalizer. And socioeconomically, it sort of brings these five disparate women together in a way that they clash, but they also understand and discover each other as similar spirits by the end of the series. I think that’s what I’m always looking for, something new and something challenging.

You’re reunited on “Big Little Lies” with your “Wild” director, Jean-Marc Vallee. How was that for you?
It’s hard for him to talk about how incredibly genius and amazing he is, but I’ve never worked with (another) director who felt the performances, who will sit and cry with you about what your character is feeling and is there with you. He is not separate. He is not watching you. He is part of the performance, and he doesn’t see race, he doesn’t see gender. He’s just the most compassionate human who also loves the visual beauty and the music, which is extraordinary, and pushes the narrative forward with its sort of mystery.

You get to work with many female co-stars in “Big Little Lies,” a relative rarity for you. What was that experience like?
It’s so refreshing to get to spend time with women, and there would be times where I couldn’t break my character. I would call Nicole (Kidman) and go, “What do you think I should do with this scene? I can’t play this.” Or I would sit with Laura Dern in a car and go, “I just can’t say those words. What would you say if you had to say this?” Honestly, we just nurtured each other’s performances.
What is the most difficult animal for you to treat?

What is the hardest is the unsocialized pet – people who have a dog tied up in the backyard. I remember one German shepherd here, the lady was afraid of it. And I’ll tell you, the minute you walked in the room the teeth and the fangs were flying all over the place and, oh yeah, then you have to clip its nails. Yeah, right.

These dogs I take away from the owner and suddenly their whole demeanor changes and then they get the reversible tranquilizer and we do whatever we want to. And yes, they walk out of the room a little staggered but they’re fine, and that’s what we have to do. So it’s the unsocialized animals that are not used to everybody walking up to them, everybody petting them, and those are the hardest to treat. And to be honest with you, those are dangerous. When your dog bites somebody, the lawyers get a hold of you and suddenly you’re poor.

Some vets say they’ve lost more blood to Chihuahuas than any other pet.

The Chihuahua is the only dog that can survive in the wild on its own, and that’s because he’s ferocious enough that he can catch a mouse, fast enough, or a rat, and that’s enough to sustain him for a day. There is no other dog that can catch or hunt enough to stay alive. ...
How difficult was it playing a woman who got her child back years after she was abducted?
The whole thing was quite difficult. I mean, it was very draining if I’m honest. But as an actor it’s really exciting to go to those places because in life, thank God, you don’t have to go there and so it is a real push to do that. But I think particularly as a parent I was certain that I didn’t want to go there. People often say, “Do you think about your own children in those instances?” And I know some people do. Whatever works for you. I’m up for people using whatever they need to use but personally I can’t think of anything worse than my children being in that situation. And the script was so good and the actors that I was surrounded with were so good that we were able to immerse ourselves in that and the story that we were telling. I certainly was anyway so I immersed myself in the fictional story that we were telling rather than relying on feelings that I might have, had it been any one of my own children.

What is your take on your character, Gemma?
Gemma is a woman that any of us could know. She could be a mother at the school. She could be somebody that you work with. She is a lovely woman. Her family is her life. She has gone and changed her life for her husband’s career and made a career of her own. She’s a teacher, they live in Germany, and she’s dedicated as a parent. You know, she has a lot of traits that we can all relate to and actually as it turns out she then becomes quite an incredible woman and she finds strength. I don’t know if I could find it. I don’t know how I would feel if I was in the same position.
COOKING
with your laptop –
the YouTube way

Over the years, YouTube has become the place to go for how-to information on anything from appliance repair and home construction to investing in the stock market and even piloting a blimp.

But did you know you could use it to learn how to whip up some pretty impressive meals, too? Yes, chefs and cooks of all backgrounds and levels of experience and accomplishment regularly post their DIY videos there, just waiting for you to check them out and even try your hand. So if you’re at a loss as to what to make for dinner tonight – or you simply want to wow your friends and family with your prowess in the kitchen – here are a few food-oriented web series worth considering.

“Laura in the Kitchen”: Laura Vitale is probably one of the most famous chefs on YouTube, logging nearly 1,200 videos on the site since 2010 and even branching out into her own Cooking Channel series “Simply Laura.” Here, the focus is on Italian cuisine as she walks viewers through the preparation of everything from yogurt zeppoles and cod arrabbiata to chicken cordon bleu pizza and grilled scallops on the half shell. She even does requests.

“My Cupcake Addiction”: Bakers will want to check out this YouTube mainstay hosted by Aussie Elise Strachan, who offers up recipes and how-tos for a variety of confections, along with kitchen tips and travel videos. Her motto is “Life Is Sweet” and her more than three million subscribers aren’t likely to argue.

“My Virgin Kitchen”: Self-taught British chef Barry Lewis is your host for this series of how-to tutorials that puts the emphasis on ease and fun as he prepares home-cooked meals. Along with the recipes – which includes items such as fluffy Japanese pancakes, mini scones and carrot cake – there are also gadget tests and unusual segments like “Cooking With a Dishwasher.”

“Kawaii Sweet World”: Teen baker Rachel Fong hosts this informative series from the basement of her parents’ Northern California home, in which she walks viewers through recipes she herself came up with. “Kawaii” in Japanese means “cute,” and that reflects in confections such as Disney Tsum Tsum cake pops, no-bake unicorn cheesecake and gingerbread girl cake.

“ChefSteps”: A cadre of James Beard Award-winning chefs not only demonstrate modern culinary concepts and recipes but they also explain how and why they work. From exotica such as lorighitta (braided pasta) and kouign-amann (a croissant-like pastry) to how-tos on the more mundane dishes like chicken or chuck roast, these folks aim to make viewers better in the kitchen and, as their motto says, “cook smarter.”

“Cooking With Dog”: No, it’s not what you think. A mysterious and unnamed Japanese chef prepares a range of dishes popular in Japan while canine host Francis narrates the recipes step by step in English. Bento boxes, sweet-and-sour meatballs, gyoza (fried dumplings) and yakisoba noodles are among the menu items prepared and consumed, no doubt followed by a belly rub and nice walk.

“You Deserve a Drink”: As the title suggests, libations are at the center of this 2014 Streamy Award-winning series hosted by actress/comedian Mamrie Hart, who offers up original cocktail recipes, then prepares and consumes them. After that, all bets are off. Guests such as actress Grace Helbig and “The Bachelor’s” Nick Viall join her as her partners in mixology.
It is said that growth, personal or professional, occurs when one steps out of one's comfort zone and tries something new.

Count Rumer Willis as a true believer in that philosophy. Over the past two years, the 28-year-old singer/actress' work has been plentiful and varied, ranging from her starring role as Roxie Hart in a Broadway production of “Chicago” and her “Over the Love” singing tour to her participation and victory in Season 20 of “Dancing With the Stars” and now, her gig as a recurring character in Fox's hip-hop drama “Empire,” which resumes its third season Wednesday, March 22.

“It was, very much (satisfying),” she says of her triumph on “DTWS” in the fall of 2015, “and especially because it was something that was so out of my realm of comfort. You know dancing, I've always loved it but it's never been my comfort zone so I think that that definitely pushed me to continue to want to step outside and challenge myself and it's why I went on tour and now I think to a certain extent one of the reasons why I was able to get this show.”

In “Empire,” Willis plays Tory Ash, a brilliant but volatile singer/songwriter collaborating with Jamal (Jussie Smollett) on what will be his most important musical work yet.

“She's definitely one of those kind of volatile rock star types who kind of just beats to her own drum, really does whatever she wants and doesn't really have an awareness of anybody else,” Willis says. “And to a certain extent, I like the fact that she kind of does her own thing but she's definitely a firestarter. ... And I think she kind of lights a fire under him and gets him remembering why he fell in love with music so much, and I think in a certain way they really kind of help each other get back on a better path.”

Did you know?

Rumer Is named after Rumer Godden, a British novelist, and Glenn Gordon Caron, creator of “Moonlighting,” in which father Bruce had his first lead role.
Calista Flockhart is an actress who can currently be seen in "Supergirl" on The CW.

- She was born on November 11, 1964 in Freeport, Illinois.
- Flockhart has Irish, Scottish, German and English ancestry.
- Graduated from Shawnee High School in Medford, NJ, where she was a cheerleader and was active in the student council.
- Attended Rutgers University in New Jersey to study acting.
- Graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1988, with a BFA in theatre.
- In 1994, she got her first Broadway role in Tennessee Williams’ "The Glass Menagerie.”
- In 1997, she landed the title role in “Ally McBeal,” which ran until 2002.
- One of People Magazine’s 50 Most Beautiful People in 1998.
- Won a People’s Choice Award for Favorite Female Television Performer in 2000.
- Adopted a baby boy she named Liam Flockhart in 2001.
- She met her husband Harrison Ford at the Golden Globe Awards in 2002 and they married in 2010.
- Flockhart is the national spokesperson for the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women and was presented with a Humanitarian Award by them in 2005.
- Was inducted into the South Jersey Arts and Entertainment Hall of Fame in 2006.
- She starred in the series “Brothers & Sisters” with Sally Field and Rob Lowe from 2006-2011.
Perhaps new celebrity contestants on “Dancing With the Stars” know what they’re in for. Or perhaps not.

Enough have been through the process by now for others to be aware of how grueling it can be, and the latest group embarks on the pursuit of the mirrorball trophy when the ABC competition starts its 24th season Monday, March 20.

The new contenders include: Olympic-medalist gymnast Simone Biles (who was a “Final Five” teammate of last season’s “Dancing” winner, Laurie Hernandez); figure-skating icon Nancy Kerrigan; “The A-Team” and “Rocky III” alum Mr. T; entertainment veteran Charo, of “cuchi cuchi” phrasing fame; former “Glee” co-star Heather Morris; and baseball’s David Ross, who won World Series titles with the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs.

Also: television’s latest “Bachelor,” Nick Viall; ex-“Saturday Night Live” regular Chris Kattan; football star Rashad Jennings; Normani Kordei of music’s Fifth Harmony; singer-actress Erika Jayne (“The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills”); and bull rider turned model Bonner Bolton.

Actress (“One Tree Hill”) and country-music star Jana Kramer placed fourth on “Dancing” last season, having endured such hurdles as torn muscles and a flu-stricken professional partner (Gleb Savchenko), so she’s very aware of surprises that can greet the newcomers. “I definitely have a newfound appreciation for it,” Kramer says. “I remember

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watching it and being like, ‘Oh, how hard can it be?’ It’s the hardest work I’ve ever done, minus birthing my daughter; it’s up there with that.”

Tom Bergeron and Erin Andrews will be back as “Dancing” co-hosts, with Len Goodman, Julianne Hough, Carrie Ann Inaba and Bruno Tonioli seated on the judges’ panel again. Kramer anticipates returning to the ballroom at some point, dependent on her schedule that includes concert touring, and she acknowledges feeling like a part of the show’s “family” now.

“It’s cool, and I’m really excited to go see one of the live shows this year,” confirms Kramer, who adds with a knowing laugh, “and more that I get to sit back and watch and not to have to hear my Russian partner screaming at me. Gleb is so busy; he just got off the road with the ‘Dancing With the Stars’ tour. We’ll text every once in a while, but you go from spending every day with someone for three months to not talking. I miss the relationship, but it was a nice chapter in my book. He’s about to start with a new partner (Jayne), and I’m a little sad and a little jealous, but I’m excited for them.”

“Excited” also defines getting perfect-10 scores from the “Dancing” judges, which Kramer experienced: “That was definitely a goal for me going in, and looking back on it now, it kind of feels like I didn’t even do it ... like a dream. It all happened so fast, and it was so many hours. It was such a whirlwind that when it was over, it was like, ‘Did that just happen?’ Even in that moment, though, I knew that we did a good job. Even if someone was to give me just a 9, I knew when we just nailed the performance.”

Kramer not only displayed her dance skills last season, but she also opened up about such emotional matters as having been a domestic-abuse victim. “‘Dancing With the Stars’ reaches a lot of people,” Kramer acknowledges, “and people really got a chance to know me and know my story. The confidence that I gained from being on that show was huge. I’m still shy about certain things, and the show really helped me get out of my box. I work so hard, I forget to play.”

Professionally, Kramer is convinced “Dancing” brought her other offers, including one for the lead role in a Hallmark Channel movie: “Love at First Bark,” debuting April 1 and casting her as a interior designer and new dog adopter. The 2013 winner of the Academy of Country Music’s award for top new female artist, she’s working on a follow-up album to 2015’s “thirty one,” but having as much time as possible with one-year-old daughter Jolie is her priority.

That may mitigate against Kramer attending this year’s ACM Awards in Las Vegas on April 2, though the jury’s still out: “Right now, my time is very much like, ‘I want to be with my child,’ so if I don’t have to be there ... but I love Vegas.”
By George Dickie

Calling in from Cape Town, South Africa, Daniel Wu says he’s enjoying filming the feature film “Tomb Raider,” which has served as something of a respite from the rigors of his day job, the AMC martial arts drama “Into the Badlands.”

“Definitely I need recovery time, for sure, and I’m definitely enjoying ‘Tomb Raider,’ where I don’t have to fight as crazily as in ‘Badlands,’ the 42-year-old actor says with a laugh. “I look at it as more of a vacation because I’m not physically enduring the kind of stuff I have to do for ‘Badlands.’"

Season 2 opens Sunday, March 19, and picks up six months after the events of the first season finale. It finds warrior Sunny (Wu) not in a good place, having been taken away from the Badlands by the River King and separated from his young colt M.K. (Aramis Knight). As the imprisoned teen struggles to control his powers, Sunny is determined to fight his way back to the Badlands and wife Veil (Madeleine Mantock) and their new baby. Along the way, they’re assisted by new allies with ulterior motives.

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Meanwhile, the Widow (Emily Beecham) continues to consolidate power against the other Barons, while a mysterious threat readies to get revenge on them all. As Sunny plots to get out of the brutal mining prison where he’s being held, he finds he’s undergoing something of a spiritual awakening.

“I think his awakening really was started with the pregnancy of Veil of last season,” Wu explains, “and that started to make him realize that what he was doing as a clipper, as a regent was not necessarily the path that he wanted to be on. And what I feel about Sunny is that he’s taken lives his whole life and then once suddenly he’s created a life, it changed him completely to the core.

“And so this season, he’s a different person altogether,” Wu continues. “He’s not the noble regent he was in the past nor is he the cold-hearted killer either. He doesn’t really want to kill anymore. He’s not interested in doing that and he’s certainly not interested in doing it for other people. He does want to exact some revenge for what happened to him last season but he’s not the cold-hearted killer he was last season. So you see him become more of a human this season, less of a cold-blooded killer and more of a father. He’s really struggling to just get back to his family.”

If the landscape in the second season looks different from that of the first, it’s for a very good reason: Shooting locations have changed from the heat and humidity of New Orleans to the greenery of Ireland. and that, asserts Wu, gives the series a much bigger feel.

“The locations were amazing,” he says. “I mean, I think we really step it up this season in terms of locations and making this a kind of bigger epic feel for the show, which we didn’t really have for last season because New Orleans, frankly speaking, is surrounded by swamp and more swamp. And so you don’t get mountains, you don’t get waterfalls, you don’t get amazing seaside ocean-cliff views. Like a lot of that you get in Ireland only half an hour drive from Dublin, city center. So it’s really amazing, and so that for the look of the show really made it much more grand and much more epic and much more cinematic, I think, than last season.”
By George Dickie

Erin and Ben Napier find that the most gratifying aspect of renovating homes for their new HGTV series “Home Town” is the morale change they see taking root around their adopted home of Laurel, Mississippi.

“Hurricane Katrina was detrimental to our town,” Erin Napier explains, “but it gets forgotten because it wasn’t on the coast and it wasn’t New Orleans. So we’ve really been battling, bringing it back from that hurricane.”

“This is something that small towns across America are going through,” Ben Napier adds. “They’re fighting as hard as they can to bring it back and so then to see outsiders come in and say, ‘Hey, I want to make this my hometown,’ that is a morale booster. It feels like, ‘OK, what I’m doing actually counts. It actually matters.’ “

The hourlong series, which premieres Tuesday, March 21, with the first of 10 episodes, follows the couple as they help a buyer or buyers find a home that fits their needs and then helps them figure out how to best remodel it to its full potential and fit the homeowner’s personality. And personal touches are what the Napiers specialize in.

The twist here is that neither has a construction background nor are they licensed to sell real estate. Ben is a woodworker by trade with an eye for detail and Erin is a designer with a degree in graphic design. The heavy work is done by the craftspeople they bring in for the jobs and the selling is done by realtors.

But since they’re involved so heavily in their community, the Napiers know all about the houses in town, and so through word of mouth, clients come to them.

“We always know what houses are for sale even if it’s not for sale,” Erin Napier says, “just because I heard so-and-so at the grocery store say that Miss So-and-So is ready to move to a condo.

“It’s gossip,” she says with a laugh. “Gossip is how we find out what houses are available.”

Most of the houses on the show are of the early 20th-century variety, ranging from ranches to Colonials to Craftsman cottages, though some are from as late as the ‘70s. Having renovated two houses of their own, the Napiers are now doing what has become their passion to help others. One might say it’s their hobby.

“We’re very DIY people just because it saves money and that’s how it all started for us as kids just out of college who had great taste but not a great budget,” Erin Napier says, laughing. “You just do what you have to do to make it work, and it became a little more than a hobby.”
With a year to go, ‘The Americans’ proceeds toward its end

BY JAY BOBBIN

“The Americans” still has much of this season and another full one to go, but many fans are conscious that the end is near.

Are the show’s stars?

FX’s much-acclaimed, Emmy-winning (twice, for recurring guest star Margo Martindale) Tuesday drama about Russian spies – played by Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys – posing as Washington, D.C., spouses continues along its twisty and turny path in Season 5. Now that their daughter Paige (Holly Taylor) is aware of their true identities, business is even more risky for Elizabeth and Philip Jennings, with FBI man Stan Beeman (Noah Emmerich) still on a trail that has seen him acquire KGB intel putting him ever closer to unmasking the duo. Also not helping them: Paige is involved with Beeman’s son Matthew (Danny Flaherty).

“You just have general things that you hope and wish for,” Russell says of nearing the end game for a series that has let her and Rhys (with whom she now has a son in real life) adopt a variety of identities in the course of playing espionage agents. “That’s one of the cool things about cable TV right now,” Rhys adds, “(that) you get a longer time to explore a character, so you’ve earned all of these thoughts that you always sort of have. You walk in with four years of wishes and wants, and then you just already have that for free.”

Even with that, Rhys acknowledges “The Americans” always has to stay within the lines of what is plausible: “I think it’s a very fine balance on our show, that we do have to remain within the realm of this reality whereby they are in these precarious situations, and the disguises have to stand up in very close quarters with people. So they can’t be too extravagant.

“We’re not ‘Mission: Impossible,’ with these prosthetic faces being ripped off,” notes Rhys, who also has directed the show for the second time with the seventh of this season’s 13 episodes. “We have what we call the ‘look book,’ the disguise book, which is thick and it still amazes me … when you look back over five years of what the incredible (makeup and hair) departments have achieved, the variation, given that we remain within the kind of parameters of not going over the top. I think it’s incredible what we’ve achieved.”

So does executive producer Joel Fields, who has collaborated closely with “The Americans” creator and co-showrunner Joe Weisberg from the start (and with whom he has a deal for another FX series).

“We’re at a curious place with the show right now in the 5th season going into the 6th, heading towards the end,” Fields reflects, “where the story opportunities have presented themselves in part because we planned for them and we knew where we were going, and in part because they’ve surprised us and have come together through this story up until now. But that’s where the story wants to go, and it’s really fun following it there. And we figure if it’s fun for us, we hope that it will be fun for the people who are watching.”
FULL NAME: Kevin Michael Harvick
BORN: Dec. 8, 1975
BIRTHPLACE: Bakersfield, California
HEIGHT/WEIGHT: 5 foot 10 inches/175 pounds
NO.: 4

TEAM: Stewart-Haas Racing
MAKE: Ford
HONORS AND ACHIEVEMENTS: Cup Champion, 2014; Daytona 500 winner, 2007; Rookie of the Year, 2001

Harvick takes a new ride into Phoenix

Story on next page
Stewart-Haas Racing switched from Chevrolet to Ford for the 2017 Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series, something Kevin Harvick will be adjusting to as he seeks his ninth Cup Series win at Phoenix International Raceway. The Camping World 500 at Phoenix airs Sunday, March 19 on Fox. That’s right, Harvick has eight career wins at Phoenix, the most of any other driver, including a victory in last year’s early season race. The big difference is this time around Harvick will be driving a Ford Fusion rather than the Chevrolet SS, which he’s been behind the wheel of for most of his career. Stewart-Haas Racing announced the change a year ago, and along with Harvick, fellow SHR members Danica Patrick, Clint Bowyer and Kurt Busch are also making the adjustment.

Change, at times, has been part of Harvick’s career. A standout in the Busch Series (now Xfinity Series) while driving for Richard Childress Racing, Harvick was thrust into the Cup Series following the death of Dale Earnhardt Sr. at the 2001 Daytona 500. Three weeks later he won his first Cup Series race at Atlanta Motor Speedway and at season’s end was named Rookie of the Year.

Harvick left Childress for Stewart-Haas Racing prior to the 2014 season and promptly won his first Cup Series Championship that season. He’s contended for the 2015 and 2016 Cup Series championships as well. Winning again at Phoenix and being among the top drivers won’t be easy in a new ride, but Harvick should be up to the task.
Matt Damon has done such a good job of fighting monsters that are in human skin, it’s now a bit of a letdown to see him battling monsters of a more traditional kind.

That’s much of what he does in “The Great Wall,” an unevenly-paced effort that has more cultural significance to the country in which it was made. It’s one of the biggest productions ever to be mounted in China, where the prospect of having a major Hollywood figure front the project understandably meant a lot to the film industry there. Here, however, it’s largely just another big-movie-star-fights-computer-generated-beasts effort.

Damon gets to wear the ancient military garb you’d expect as a mercenary who’s in the company of an ally (Pedro Pascal) when they make their way to the Great Wall of China and are enlisted – by considerable force – to help fight hungry monsters that swallow anything or anyone that crosses their paths. None of them has the constitution to swallow Jason Bourne, though, so it’s pretty much a given that the foregone survival of the hero robs the tale of any true suspense.

In fact, the character has many less-than-honorable traits, which may be the biggest surprise “The Great Wall” has to offer. It could be a way to enhance the picture’s Chinese influence and give the message that not every American is necessarily upstanding and savior-like, though Damon surely gets bountiful chances to display heroism. After all, this primarily remains a vehicle for him, and audiences around the world expect certain things from him when he’s in an action vein.

Willem Dafoe also turns up, but except for Damon’s participation, “The Great Wall” is concerned with showing off what Chinese moviemakers can do. That’s not inconsiderable, and for a major American studio like Universal to sign off on distributing the picture in the U.S., it would have to exhibit a certain level of skill. Otherwise, it’s unlikely that Damon (who also has smarts as a producer) would be on board, either.

Director Zhang Yimou is an accomplished screen technician, also as a writer, cinematographer and actor – as proven by such past works as “Raise the Red Lantern,” “Hero” and “House of Flying Daggers.” He remains proficient that way with “The Great Wall,” but it will be remembered primarily for Matt Damon. If, that is, it’s remembered at all.
“SING”
The proceedings are musical, indeed, in a world of animals as the title of this enjoyable computer-animation tale infers. Against a soundtrack of very familiar tunes, Matthew McConaughey leads an all-star voice cast as a koala who owns a theater, but it faces closure unless the needed funds are raised through a vocal competition he stages. The finalists include a pig (voice of Reese Witherspoon), a mouse (voice of Seth MacFarlane), a porcupine (voice of Scarlett Johansson) and a gorilla (voice of Taron Egerton, “Kingsman: The Secret Service”). John C. Reilly, Nick Offerman (“Parks and Recreation”), Jennifer Hudson, Rhea Perlman and several “Saturday Night Live” veterans – Laraine Newman, Jay Pharoah and Leslie Jones – also are heard. The film’s writer-director, Garth Jennings, voices a senior-citizen iguana. *** (PG: AS) (Also on Blu-ray and On Demand)

UPCOMING DVD RELEASES

“FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM” (March 28): The J.K. Rowling story casts Eddie Redmayne as a “magizoolgist” who loses several of his fantastic beasts in mid-1920s New York. (PG-13: V)

“A MONSTER CALLS” (March 28): A troubled youngster (Lewis MacDougall) with an ill mother finds a very unexpected ally in a tree monster. (PG-13: AS)

“PATRIOTS DAY” (March 28): The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing is dramatized as Mark Wahlberg plays a police sergeant trying to help those injured by the blasts. (R: AS, P, V)

“20TH CENTURY WOMEN” (March 28): Annette Bening plays a woman who recruits others to help raise her son in the late 1970s; Greta Gerwig and Elle Fanning also star. (R: AS, N, P)

“WHY HIM?” (March 28): A conservative man (Bryan Cranston) is unsettled by his daughter’s choice of boyfriend (James Franco). (R: AS, P)

“OFFICE CHRISTMAS PARTY” (April 4): Workers refuse to let their branch’s pending closure wreck their holiday bash; Jennifer Aniston, Jason Bateman and T.J. Miller star. (R: AS, N, P)

Family Viewing Ratings

AS Adult situations  P Profanity  V Violence  N Nudity  GV Graphic Violence

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SUNDAY
9 p.m. on CBS
Madam Secretary
Elizabeth’s (Tea Leoni) decision to meet with an ailing Dalai Lama offends Chinese leaders, threatening landmark climate treaty with more than 200 countries in the new episode “Swept Away.” Elsewhere, Henry (Tim Daly) worries about the safety of an undercover operative, while Abby (guest star Stephanie J. Block) serves Jay (Sebastian Arcelus) a custody agreement for their daughter. Sarita Choudhury and Jan Maxwell also guest star.

MONDAY
8 p.m. on ABC
Dancing With the Stars
The season 24 premiere of this perennial fan favorite is also its 400th episode, and this season’s roster of celebrity performers is as diverse as ever. Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles, whose teammate Laurie Hernandez danced off with the trophy last season, is among the contenders, along with another past Olympian, figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. Other stars include former “Glee” star Heather Morris, ageless Spanish music star Charo and World Series champ David Ross, the show’s first baseball star.

TUESDAY
8:31 p.m. on FOX
The Mick
When it starts to appear that Chip (Thomas Barbusca) is getting scammed by a girl he met online, Mickey (Katilin Olsen) gives the boy a crash course in how to be a wolf, not a sheep, in life. Meanwhile, Sabrina (Sofia Black-D’Elia) plans to hold an intervention when she starts worrying that her boyfriend (guest star Andy Favreau) is picking up some of Jimmy’s (Scott MacArthur) less admirable habits in the new episode “The Wolf.” Carla Jimenez also stars.

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WEDNESDAY
8 p.m. on FOX
Shots Fired
A North Carolina town is rocked by shootings that may have been racially motivated in this new, clearly timely limited-run drama series from filmmaking spouses Gina Prince-Bythewood and Reggie Rock Bythewood. Sanaa Lathan and Stephan James play investigators for the Department of Justice who come to suspect the state’s governor (Helen Hunt) isn’t telling all she knows. Richard Dreyfuss, Stephen Moyer and Tristan Wilds also are in the ensemble cast. Series Premiere

THURSDAY
8 p.m. on FOX
MasterChef
Former “Top Chef” champ Richard Blais is guest judge for the new episode “Junior Edition: Pie-Eyed,” which — as the title suggests — finds the Top 12 young chefs, working in four teams of three, cranking out as many pies as they can manage in 10 minutes. The winning team is safe from elimination in the big challenge, which tasks them with using a blow torch to make an appetizer, entree or dessert from ingredients in the show’s pantry. New

FRIDAY
8 p.m. on NBC
Grimm
The dark prophecy appears to be nearing fulfillment when a sinister force arrives in Portland with its eyes set on Diana (Hannah R. Loyd) in the new episode “Zerstorrer Shrugged.” Trying to protect her, Nick (David Giuntoli), along with Captain Renard and Adalind (Sasha Roiz, Claire Coffee), returns to the scene of his first investigation as a Grimm. Meanwhile, Monroe, Eve and Rosalee (Silas Weir Mitchell, Bitsie Tulloch, Bree Turner) make a discovery that uncovers the origins of the mysterious stick. New

SATURDAY
8 p.m. on HBO
Movie: Independence Day: Resurgence
Its title notwithstanding, this 2016 sequel to the 1996 blockbuster didn’t exactly trigger a resurgence of interest on the part of fans with its plot about those nasty extraterrestrials staging a lethal comeback on the 20th anniversary of their initial invasion. Liam Hemsworth, Jeff Goldblum and Bill Pullman head the international ensemble of the film, which earned back its production costs but fell far short of the worldwide gross racked up by the original. Premiere