

Where's the Love? – Summer Movies 2006

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 05 September 2006 22:16

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It's awkwardly paced. It's often indifferently acted. The composition is remedial, the humor is juvenile, and for every scene that soars, another one crashes.

When all is said and done, though, you know which summer movie was my favorite? *Clerks II*. And do you know why? Because it isn't *cynical*.

Of course it's easy to argue that, being a sequel, cynicism is baked right in. It's *Clerks II* for heaven's sake - would it even *exist*

if some studio chief didn't expect it to make *Clerks*

-like dough? Yet it's clear that writer/director Kevin Smith, here, isn't just concerned with his film's finances - he's concerned with his film's characters, and, as an almost inevitable result, his film's *audience*

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Smith loves his *Clerks* creations with a fervor that no other director this summer matched, and he clues us in on how *much* he loves them in the film's opening minutes. Before settling in to the movie's storyline proper at Dante's and Randall's burger joint, Smith takes his leads on an extended drive to work, where the silence in the air suggests years of wasted time on the road to *another* dead-end job. En route, they pull up outside the familiar Quick Stop, recently destroyed in a fire. They stare at the charred remains, and Randall asks Dante if he misses it. Hell no, Dante replies. Do *you*? And Randall simply stares at the building, and says nothing.

It's a lovely, early grace note in the film, and it isn't an aberration. In between the bouts of hilariously profane banter, Dante and Randall stop and actually reflect on the 12 years that have passed between *Clerks* and its sequel, and it's apparent that Smith has taken that time, too. The carefree, life-sucks-so-let's-laugh-at-it blitheness of the original isn't so carefree anymore, and Smith never pretends otherwise; by the time Dante has made his final decision to leave New Jersey, and Randall begs him - in the summer's most startlingly emotional scene - not to go, the characters are no longer slacker jokes, if they ever were. Smith's love for these guys is evident in his decision to let them be *people*. *Clerks II* is the opposite of *deeply* cynical. It's *deeply* sincere.

And, more than anything, sincerity is exactly what this summer's movies were lacking.

Two films, I thought, came close to matching *Clerks II* for sheer open-heartedness. One was *Superman Returns*. There's a lot that's wrong with the film - Lex Luthor's scenes, in particular, were gracelessly handled - but Bryan Singer's re-imagining of the franchise is nothing if not heartfelt; a great deal of care was obviously put into making sure the movie *didn't* come off as a cynical rehash. Singer and company know the fond feelings viewers have for the early Christopher Reeve entries (based in part, of course, on our fond feelings for *Reeve*) and, in between spectacular action set-pieces, the work is thoughtful and serious - *Superman Returns* shows proper respect for the audience's fondness for the material.

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It's there in the grave, forthright performances of Brandon Routh and Kate Bosworth; it's there in the suitably majestic sequence of Superman lifting an entire *world* out of the ocean; it's there in the hushed awe with which the Metropolis denizens watch Superman breeze through the night sky. In *Superman Returns*, t

hings
matter

, be they romantic encounters or heroic acts or the simple sight of a man who can fly - the filmmakers know that we

want

to believe, and create a comic-book world where we actually do.

The other film that I found similarly, unexpectedly touching was, ironically enough, another comic-book entry, and - even more ironically - another blockbuster sequel: *X-Men: The Last Stand*. I'm *really* also

ne on this one. But while I won't pretend that the movie's great - or even that it's as good as Bryan Singer's entries - it's a completely satisfying experience, because, as in

Clerks II

and

Superman Returns

, it's made by people who appear to truly

care

about it.

After two *X-Men* films, Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Famke Janssen, Anna Paquin, and others are so emotionally invested in their roles that everything that happens in the film carries weight, and Brett Ratner, who has never been accused of being a visionary, does everything in his power to not muck up *Singer's* vision. The movie, despite its

perfunctory dialogue, has gravitas, and the series, for many audience members,

means

something;

The Last Stand

honors the audience's attachment to the characters. When Wolverine sinks his claws into Jean Grey with an aching "I love you," or when Magneto finds himself desperately, pitifully alone at the film's climax, the film transcends any blockbuster-franchise aspirations. It becomes

legitimately

moving

.

Hoping to be moved, however, is not the reason any of us go to see *Clerks II* or *Superman*

Returns

or *X-M*

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en: The Last Stand.

All three films deliver what you expect them to - big laughs in the Smith film, big excitement in the comic-book flicks - but their joy is that they give the audience so much

more

, and what concerns me about the movies released this summer is how so few of them

aim

for more.

You like a movie fine when it gives you what you paid for. You *love* a movie when it gives you something you didn't even know you wanted. And in the summer of 2006, movie love was in depressingly short supply.

Let's look at the highest-grossing films of the summer. In addition to *X-Men* and *Superman*, we had

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest, *Cars*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Over the Hedge*, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, *Click*, *Mission: Impossible III*,

and

The Devil Wears Prada.

You may have liked several of them, but how many of them did more for you than simply meet expectations? How many of them did you actually

love

?

Certainly, a lot of people really enjoyed *Cars*, even though I'm not one of them. (Every single Pixar movie since 1995's *Toy Story* has landed on

my annual 10-best list. At this point in the year,

Cars

doesn't crack my top

60

.) But can anyone say that they were at all

surprised

by it? The film gave viewers everything they expect from Pixar - wizardly animation, bright colors, a recognizable vocal cast ... everything except wit. The film followed the Pixar formula slavishly but wasn't

inspired

.

Meanwhile, the similarly pixilated *Over the Hedge* was perfectly charming and often really

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funny, but for all the entertainment to be had from the film, nothing about it is very memorable - I dare any adult fan of the film to recall the characters by

name

. (And saying "Bruce Willis" doesn't count.)

Like those two offerings, the other big box-office winners seemed to give their fan base exactly what they wanted from them - no more, no less. Well, *oftentimes* less, actually. *The Da Vinci Code* was a

deeply unimaginative movie experience, which might be what more than \$200 million worth of Dan Brown devotees were hoping it would be; I know numerous people who said the film wasn't as good as the book (which I haven't read) and not one who seemed

upset

about that. It was the literal film adaptation they were expecting. The only shock would have come if the movie were

better

than the book.

Everyone went to see *Pirates*, of course, yet I don't know anyone who loves it. I don't know anyone who *hates* it, either. It's a hard film to bitch about - we get the great effects, the snappy badinage, Johnny Depp in his slurring, staggering prime. We just don't get a story that means anything, or rather, that won't mean anything until it's (possibly) decoded in *Pirates 3* next year. There are

enough high points to make up for the lows, but just barely. We let the movie off on a pass because we expect the third film to be

really

good.

Meanwhile, the third entry in the *Mission: Impossible* series wasn't good, "really" or otherwise, yet the Tom Cruise fan base - and I'm sure there are two or three of you left out there - probably wasn't disappointed; like its star, *M:I3* is

professional, sleek, and soulless. It's the definitive Tom Cruise Movie. Similarly,

Click

is an Adam Sandler Movie to its teeth, with its profoundly adolescent gags about boobs and farting, its maudlin sentimentality, and its relentless product placement. So why didn't more people notice how

miscast

its star was in it?

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Probably because Sandler is giving audiences exactly the Sandler performance people expect from him, regardless of how ill-suited it is to the film; he's a one-trick pony, but enough people still seem to get a charge out of that one trick. Ditto Will Ferrell, whose *Talladega Nights* is custom-fit for the comedian - for my money, a little

too

custom-fit. The star gets his laughs, but when he lets loose with one of his comically hostile outbursts, or runs around in his underwear, no one's laughing out of

surprise

at the antics; in

Talladega Nights

,
Will Ferrell is doing what Will Ferrell

does

.

Of the top-grossers, the most heartening hit was *The Devil Wears Prada*, and this is coming from someone who didn't much

like The Devil Wears Prada.

But even though the movie is pure formula - a

Pretty Woman

for the new millennium - I'm happy about its success because the positive word-of-mouth *is*

based on surprise: Who knew Meryl Streep was this funny? (Well, a lot of us did, actually, but the movies she's funny

in

rarely get the attention they deserve.) The movie may be predictable, but Streep

never

is.

Beyond Streep and the *Clerks/Superman/X-Men* triumvirate, what films this summer *did* manage to surprise me? Well,

Monster House

was an unexpectedly terrific time, even though I'm pretty sure the movie would have been just as fun - and would have made just as much money - as a live-action feature; after

Cars, Over the Hedge, The Ant Bully, Barnyard -

not to mention

Hookwinked,

the

Ice Age

sequel,

The Wild,

and

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Doogal

- I, for one, am

exhausted

with computer-animated "marvels" this year. (Besides, who wouldn't have loved to watch the comedic byplay between

Monster House

voice-over performers Maggie Gyllenhaal and Jason Lee?)

My Super Ex-Girlfriend

was a thoroughly enjoyable, thoroughly ignored light comedy, and I have a major soft spot for a trio of movies I can't really

defend -

The Lake House, Nacho Libre,

and

Snakes on a Plane -

but which were at least honest, even if all they were honest

about

was their own ridiculousness.

But most of the relative hits *outside* the top 10 were as generic - as lacking in surprise and sincerity - as anything that topped \$120 million.

The Break-Up, You, Me, & Dupree, The Fast & the Furious: Tokyo Drift, Poseidon, Little Man, Step Up, The Omen -

all of them grossed more than \$50 million domestically. Any of them you have a hankering to see

again

? They're all merely product, and it's hard to get

excited

by product.

Even the moderate summertime hits by some of Hollywood's premier filmmakers failed to enthrall; Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* was a beautifully directed bore, Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* was

undone by a shamelessly melodramatic script, and as for M. Night Shymalan's

Lady in the Water

... well, as the movie has made more than double what

Clerks II

has, I'm sure it has its fans. I wouldn't necessarily want to

meet

any of them, but they must be out there.

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Would summer movies, as a whole, have been more bearable if there were still a Brew & View around to bring our area some relief from Hollywood cookie-cutter fare? It certainly couldn't have *hurt* - we've thus far been deprived of such titles as *A Scanner Darkly* (which will, however, open at Moline's Nova 6 Cinemas on Friday, September 8)

, *Half Nelson*, *Factotum*, *Edmond*,

and even the film version of

Strangers With Candy.

But to be honest, we weren't missing out on that

many

alternative titles. Showcase 53 did book

Art School Confidential

, which was sensational, even if it does stand as perhaps 2006's

most

cynical movie. Woody Allen's

Scoop

came and went, but at least it

came. *Little Miss Sunshine*

has turned into a sizable hit, even if the film is far less indie than it pretends to be; the budget -

and, to a certain extent, the

cast

-

suggests

indie, but the script is as Hollywood as they come. (Imagine a

Nacho Libre

starring Ethan Suplee or a

Talladega Nights

starring Bruce Campbell and you'll get the idea.)

And our area was lucky enough to get the Al Gore documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which managed to play Showcase 53 for two weeks - it would have played for

months

at the Brew & View - and which (nationally at least) managed something nearly unthinkable in the summer-movie season: It brought out an audience that doesn't

go

to summer movies.

So did Robert Altman's *A Prairie Home Companion*, which also stuck around longer than we may have expected it to, and which was the only

non

-sequel this summer I came close to loving. The movie isn't completely devoid of cynicism - the naturally ornery Altman wouldn't allow it - but it

is

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filled with surprise, and its heart is as big as the sky.

When Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin good-naturedly blather over one another's conversations, or when singing cowboys John C. Reilly and Woody Harrelson actually make you *laugh* over their "Bad Jokes," you're reminded that movies are at their best when they believe in the worlds and characters they create, whether they exist in an Altman ensemble comedy or the latest Hollywood blockbuster. The summer movies we treasure are the ones with faith in their material, and faith in their audiences to accept sincerity

,

even if - like the
Spider-Man
films,
The 40-Year-Old Virgin,
or the original
Pirates -
what they're most sincere about is providing escapism. We need more movies that
believe

.

We'll always love movies. Even summer movies. It would be wonderful if more of them started loving us *back*.