

Written by Mike Schulz

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MONSTER

In all honesty, I was rather dreading Patty Jenkins' *Monster*, the much-lauded drama that has received nearly universal acclaim (and a Best Actress Golden Globe) for star Charlize Theron.

Everything about the film – a spare, downbeat independent release, made on a shoestring budget, which centers on an alternative relationship between two women and ends with the protagonist's untimely death – sounded reminiscent of 1999's *Boys Don't Cry*, a movie I thoroughly disliked. Yes, Oscar-winner Hilary Swank was impressive as the transgendered Brandon Teena, yet the film itself was a morbid, ugly work, so insistent on making the audience uncomfortable that it had no variety whatsoever. Director/co-writer Kimberly Peirce suffused every scene of

Boys with the threat of impending violence and unimaginable humiliation, and the effect was wearying; you dreaded each new scene not because you didn't know what was coming next but because Peirce made sure you knew

exactly what was coming next. Patty Jenkins hasn't exactly transcended this dilemma – the trajectory of her characters' fates can only go from bad to much, much worse – but what I was completely unprepared for in

Monster was the unbridled

joy that emanates from the movie. It's an actor's joy; Charlize Theron gives the kind of thrilling, impassioned portrayal that can only come, perhaps, from a performer who knows this is her one shot at greatness and isn't about to blow it.

Theron's role as serial-killer Aileen Wuornos is Academy Award catnip – a downtrodden, overweight, sexually abused prostitute who enters into a lesbian relationship, begins killing johns for money, and winds up executed – but Theron never grandstands; she burrows deeply into the sordid, deeply sad world of Wuornos and allows you to understand this killer so completely that the result is exhilarating. Nothing that Theron has previously done onscreen comes close to preparing you for this performance. Based on stills and film footage I've seen of the real-life Wuornos, Theron's physical transformation (Toni G. served as makeup artist) is uncanny, but look beyond the prosthetics and you'll see an interior transformation even more

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remarkable. You don't see her trying *too* hard, as you did in *The Devil's Advocate* and *Celebrity*, and the vacuousness inherent in her many "girlfriend" roles appears gone forever. In *Monster*

, Theron is tragic and powerfully frightening – the terror in the film comes not from wondering when Wuornos will strike, but just how deeply her madness extends – but, in the film's first half, she also exudes happiness and hope, which makes Wuornos' path to brutality all the more heartbreaking. Jenkins allows her Wuornos enough early promise to give weight to the character's inevitable decline and momentum to the movie itself, and Theron's artistry keeps the material from being unbearable; you're constantly aware of Theron's portrayal as a *performance*

, but rather than hampering the film, this slight remove has a dazzling effect. Christina Ricci delivers some of her finest acting yet as Wuornos' needy lover – with Theron going at full force, Ricci's more modest work is bound to be undervalued – and Jenkins continually provides a detailed, staggering look at one human being's horrifying decline. But make no mistake: This is Charlize Theron's show. Her impending Oscar win has been a *fait accompli*

for some time now, and it's marvelous to see that it'll actually be a deserved one.



THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

The only thing *The Butterfly Effect* has going for it is its premise, and the filmmakers even manage to muck *that* up. The title refers to the idea that even a butterfly flapping its wings can have some pronounced effect on actions halfway around the world; in theory, if you went back in time, and the butterfly changed its course in even the slightest manner, everything that subsequently transpired on earth would be vastly different. It's an entrancing notion, and it keeps *The Butterfly Effect*

engrossing for about the first half-hour. In the movie, university student Ashton Kutcher, in an attempt to save the life of his one true love (Amy Smart), finds a way to travel back in time and undo a horrific event from their past, only to find each new present he enters more nightmarish than the one before. This is a situation that could be played for either tragedy or comedy – a few seasons ago, it was pulled off spectacularly on a Halloween-themed episode of

The Simpsons

– and, for a while, you muddle through the movie's crummy dialogue and inept staging for the horror kicks,

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Final Destination

films, you expect will come. Yet I must admit, given the vastness of the Butterfly Effect principle itself, that I was hoping for a little more than Ashton Kutcher re-writing the past and waking up to find himself with ... a different roommate. The whole movie feels like a missed opportunity.

There's no trashy fun to be had, no clever twists, no true scares, and the damned thing is presented so seriously that there's nothing to laugh at except Ashton Kutcher's acting.

Employing all his familiar tics and twitches from

That '70s Show

, but adding extra layers of mopiness and weepiness – Ooo! “Dramatic acting!” – Kutcher isn't believable as a human being, let alone a brilliant scientist-in-the-making. (The movie could be subtitled “Dude, Where's My Motivation?”)

The Butterfly Effect

is a joke, and it makes you wish the filmmakers had

realized

that and re-worked the material as a slapstick farce, where it might have had a chance for success.



TORQUE

After the forced histrionics of *The Butterfly Effect*, a zippy, completely brainless release such as *Torque*

almost feels like a tonic. Well ... a soda, actually. Though I tried awfully hard to pay attention to the nuances of the plot – it has something to do with the retrieval of crystal meth hidden in the gas tanks of some stolen motorcycles – I was never quite sure of what was going on, but I was definitely thirsty for a Pepsi; the movie's relentless product placement for beer and bikes and carbonated beverages makes

Torque

feel like the longest filmed advertisement in the history of theatrical commercials. Every 10 minutes or so, the action stops completely dead for 60 seconds of bikini-clad women enjoying malt beverages or unshaven louts caressing their Harleys; after the end credits rolled, I found myself still waiting for the movie to

begin

. For what it is, I suppose

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Torque

is amusing enough. There's an enjoyable bike chase atop a moving train, and the cartoonishness of the presentation – when the hogs fly by at some 200 miles per hour, street signs spin around, women's skirts blow upwards, and a trail of fire follows the bikers like Leonard Smalls in

Raising Arizona

– gives the film a lightweight, playful air. Yet by the end of

Torque

's 80 minutes, you'll still find yourself hungry for a movie. And probably a Big Mac.