

"Miracle" Too Calculated to Be Enjoyable: Also, "The Big Bounce" and "The Perfect Score"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 10 February 2004 18:00



MIRACLE

Although I'm generally a sucker for triumph-of-the-underdog sports flicks – 1986's *Hoosiers* remains my favorite – and was all set to have a good sniffle at

Miracle

, the movie is so cynically programmed to be a lump-in-the-throat audience-pleaser that I found it all too easy to resist.

The story itself, of course, is beyond any Hollywood producer's wildest feel-good fantasy; *Miracle* tells

of the 1980 Olympic hockey team that, after the malaise of the late '70s, united the country in patriotic fervor with its shocking victory over the supposedly unbeatable Russians. (The Americans went on to win the gold against Finland, which stands as a mere footnote in *Miracle*

's presentation.) Led by taciturn coach Herb Brooks (Kurt Russell), the team is the epitome of boyish gumption, and for a while the movie plays predictably but competently, as the players move past their differences, learn to play as a team, and unite in a common goal – kicking the crap out of those brutish Soviets.

Movies such as *Miracle* are tough to knock because they're generally so formulaic that if the filmmakers merely follow the formula with enough conviction, the audience will happily follow. (It's the reason movies such as

Rudy

and

Remember the Titans

, though by no means great works, can still be enormously, emotionally satisfying.) So, in *Miracle*

, we can easily sit through the rote scenes of the team's initial squabbles and Brooks defying fellow hockey officials and ignoring his family (including a depressingly ill-used Patricia Clarkson as Brooks' wife) to get to the meat of the movie: the playoff games leading to the inevitable confrontation with the Russians. But strangely, the scenes on the ice are actually

Miracle

's

least

effective ones. Partly, this is because hockey itself is so hard to film adequately – the movie

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could have really used someone like Sam Raimi, with his whirling-dervish camera, to give visual equivalent to the game's speed – but also because director Gavin O'Connor films each game like the climactic scene in an action blockbuster: The clock, with precious seconds ticking away, is shot in diagonal and referred to every few moments, and with the film's shameless soundtrack pounding away at us, it looks just like a "Should we snip the red wire or the green wire?" sequence in a Michael Bay picture; it's an unintentionally hilarious effect right when the audience should be reaching for the Kleenex. The best – the only – reason to see the film is for Kurt Russell's nuanced portrayal of a man who feels more than he'd ever dare reveal; he's the only human element among the calculated machinations of
Miracle



THE BIG BOUNCE

Have you ever been to a party where everyone around you is sharing stories and laughing uproariously and you have no clue what the hell's going on? Welcome to *The Big Bounce*. Based on an Elmore Leonard novel that inspired a 1969 movie, this re-make is a who's-screwing-whom crime comedy set in Hawaii, directed by
Grosse Pointe Blank

's George Armitage, and featuring such reliable pros as Owen Wilson, Morgan Freeman, Gary Sinise, Charlie Sheen, Bebe Neuwirth, Willie Nelson, and Harry Dean Stanton, plus a surprisingly sassy turn by model-cum-actress Sara Foster. All the elements are in place for a smart, relaxing diversion, but whatever amusement was had during the making of the film isn't shared with the audience; I've rarely seen a movie that seemed

less

interested in keeping its viewers in the loop. Characters are introduced, plots are hatched, yet no one sequence appears to have any connection to another; scene after scene plays with a sun-drenched, easygoing rhythm, but nothing that happens has any consequence, and the characters' motives and connections to one another all seem to be revealed off-camera. You feel like you're wandering into every scene a little bit late. One moment, in particular, is telling: Wilson, Freeman, Nelson, and Stanton are sitting around drinking and playing dominoes, and the whole point of the sequence appears to be in watching how the elder actors (Stanton in particular) visibly crack Wilson up every few seconds; the movie's entire subtext might as well be: "Don't you wish you were having as much fun as

we

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are?"

The Big Bounce

plays like a bikini-clad

Cannonball Run

, so dementedly pleased with itself that you have little choice but to hate it.



THE PERFECT SCORE

I adore *The Breakfast Club* for reasons passing human understanding, so it's probably unsurprising that I kinda enjoyed *The Perfect Score*. It's been a long time since I've seen a movie of its ilk, where a disparate group of teenagers band together to bemoan their parents, their cliques, their whole stupid *society*

for failing to realize that they are, in fact, unique individuals who refuse to kowtow to some preconceived notion of who and what they're supposed to be. (Of course, as a teenager myself when

The Breakfast Club

was first released, I reacted to the defiances of Judd Nelson and company with a rousing "Yeah!!!" Now, nearly 20 years later, I listen to the lamentations of the cast of

The Perfect Score

with a feeling of "Awwww, you poor, sweet kids. You really *don't*

know anything, do you?") This being the 21st Century, though, this new work is a high-tech *Breakfast Club*

, wherein a half-dozen teens plot to steal the answers to the SAT by hacking into computers and breaking into a building

Mission: Impossible

-style

before

getting around to the inevitable bonding.

The Perfect Score, as you can imagine, is ridiculous, and although it offers a fairly sound denunciation for standardized testing, it lacks bite; the filmmakers go out of their way to assure

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us that, although a crime is about to be perpetrated, these are good kids who'll eventually do the right thing. A general blandness lingers over the movie, and that feeling isn't tempered by much of the casting. Erika Christensen, so electric in *Traffic* and *Swimfan*, seems nearly lobotomized here, and Chris Evans, Bryan Greenberg, and Darius Miles aren't able to come up with one personality between them. But the film zips along at a nice clip, and, after years of beyond-asinine teen flicks in the

American Pie

mold, it's refreshing to see a movie in which teenagers are thinking about *something*

other than getting laid. Plus, Scarlett Johansson is on hand to give the proceedings some vibrancy. At age 19, this actress has already given three performances – in

The Horse Whisperer

,
Ghost World

, and

Lost in Translation

– that I wouldn't hesitate to call great, and though her sarcastic-misfit role doesn't give Johansson much room to breathe,

The Perfect Score

sparkles when she's around; Johansson is currently the same age Lauren Bacall was when she seduced Bogie in

To Have & Have Not

, and she shares the young Bacall's gift for making whatever film she's in more enticing than even its filmmakers might have intended.