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STARSKY & HUTCH

In various projects over the years, Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson have repeatedly proven their talents in writing, directing, and performing, yet if they were to trash all their other aspirations and simply make one deliriously dumbass comedy together per year, I, for one, wouldn't mind in the slightest.

They're certainly the only comedy team imaginable for Todd Phillips' cinematic update of *Starsky & Hutch*; watching Stiller (whose Starsky is prone to pissy, little girl-ish temper tantrums) match half-wits with Wilson (Hutch being the perfect vehicle for Wilson's stoned-surfer insouciance) is practically reason enough to continue viewing movies (and Oscar telecasts) in the 21st Century. The film itself has an unreasonably high number of virtues; Phillips totally nails the look and tone of squalid '70s cop shows, complete with era-appropriate wocka-ja-wocka-ja-wocka music, Snoop Dogg is pitch-perfect as Huggy Bear, and there are a few out-of-left-field sequences – like Huggy-and-friends' analysis of what, exactly, constitutes a terrarium – that had me and a friend nearly falling out of our theatre seats laughing. While not as consistently funny as *Zoolander* or as inspired as the scenes they shared in *Meet the Parents*, *Starsky & Hutch* is as divertingly brainless as you could want, and further indication that Stiller & Wilson might just be our generation's answer to Martin & Lewis.

TWISTED

If, like me, you're a fan of Philip Kaufman – whose résumé includes *The Right Stuff*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and the 1978 re-make of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* – the news that he's currently helming the Ashley Judd thriller *Twisted* is enough to make you want to kill yourself. It's not that he does the film any disservice; his staging is sharp and, as in *Body Snatchers*, he makes impressive use of his San Francisco locales. But, let's face it: Ashley Judd thrillers don't *need* a director. They just need a *title*. This latest entry in Judd's R-rated *oeuvre* features our spunky ball-buster as a homicide detective whose one-night-stands all wind up dead, and Judd's character, prone to alcohol-induced blackouts, is the prime suspect. Could our heroine, in fact, be the killer? Or could it actually be her scruffily charming partner (Andy Garcia)? Or her grimly serene father figure (Samuel L. Jackson)? Truth be told, I barely stayed awake long enough to find out, but if you make it through the film's depressing blandness, I challenge you to *not* giggle at its staggeringly silly dénouement. I saw *Twisted* at a screening with about nine others in attendance. None of us succeeded.

AGAINST THE ROPES

At one point in *Against the Ropes*, Meg Ryan, playing famed boxing promoter Jackie Kallen, is being questioned at a press conference and is asked about her surprising success in a male-dominated sport. Ryan, her voice scratchy and her accent unidentifiable (Boston by way of Minnesota?), replies, "I just never tried to ingratiate myself to others," and the movie's audience doesn't know how to take the line, because all we've *seen* is Ryan trying to ingratiate herself to us. It's fairly obvious that in

Against the Ropes
Ryan is attempting one of her realistic, “gritty” performances – the film could be titled
In the Upper-Cut
– and she’s not terrible, exactly; she connects with the other performers and delivers her lines with sincerity. And yet she still comes off badly, as do such usually resilient performers as Omar Epps, Tony Shalhoub, and Charles S. Dutton (who also directs), because the whole film is so pre-determined and sitcom-cute that the actors seem to be playing carbon-copies of
carbon-copies
of stereotypes that were old news when Stallone foisted them on us back in 1976. The whole
film
is ingratiating in a particularly lackluster way; it’s a bland TV movie-of-the-week, one you can just as easily skip when it appears on cable, which should be any minute now.

DIRTY DANCING:HAVANA NIGHTS* and *EUROTRIP

There’s currently such a surfeit of youthful acting talent that it’s a shame there aren’t more good movies for young actors to appear in. In a just world, there would be no earthly reason to sit through *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* or *Eurotrip*; the former is a re-tread of 1987’s seminal coming-of-age tale, and the latter is a generic teen farce where sexual humiliation,
à la American Pie
, is the comedic
entrée du jour
. Yet both movies house such disarmingly strong performers that they wind up relatively entertaining nonetheless. As a film,
Havana Nights
is clunky and labored, and director Guy Ferland appears to have choreographed with a stopwatch; the cutting is so frenzied that you have to accept on faith the “hotness” of the dancing. Romola Garai and Diego Luna, though, transcend the film’s inanity. Garai is a radiant innocent with an unusual ingénue appeal – not a big girl but a
solid
one, Garai gives a perfect approximation of someone uncomfortable in her own skin – and watching her transformation from gawky, brainy outcast to shimmying belle-of-the-ball is surprisingly touching. And Luna is a true charmer, providing enough erotic hints to make his union with Garai one that, against your better judgment, you still end up smiling through.

The smart young cast of *Europtrip* makes you smile, too. Although the film is only sporadically funny, something will startle you into laughter every few minutes – not least the inspired cameos by Matt Damon, Vinnie Jones, and Xena herself, Lucy Lawless – and unlike many a youth-oriented comedy, it's not hateful toward its characters, perhaps because the actors exhibit such indefatigable high spirits. Lead Scott Mechlowicz has some of the boyish, go-for-broke nuttiness of early Tom Hanks, Michelle Trachtenberg and Travis Wester entertain as a pair of sweetly squabbling (though highly unlikely) twins, and Jacob Pitts, his style perched somewhere between David Spade and Jeff Goldblum, is a hoot; I'd say he steals the picture if that weren't such a petty theft.

THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE

The Triplets of Belleville, currently completing its run at the Brew & View, is spectacularly weird – a thrilling animated tale for those who find Disney's animated works a tad too cuddly – and trying to explain its appeal is like trying to explain the "plot" of the most outlandish, bizarrely enjoyable dream you've ever had. If your dream was like that of Sylvain Chomet, *Belleville*'s creator, your conversation would go something like this: "So, this young bicyclist gets kidnapped while training for the Tour de France, and his club-footed mother and portly dog try to rescue him, enlisting the help of a trio of deranged crones who used to be a famed singing trio and whose diet consists of frogs they kill by lobbing hand grenades into a pond ... oh, and did I mention that it's in French? Without subtitles?" If that précis tickles you – and it should – this clever, visually inventive, and very funny work will, too.