

Written by Mike Schulz
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13 GOING ON 30

When you watch a body-switching comedy such as *Big* or *Freaky Friday*, you know immediately that the movie is going to require a huge suspension of disbelief; these are comedy *fantasies*, after all, and bitching about logic and realistic plotting is the surest way to kill your good time.

And I was fine with *13 Going on 30*'s central hook, where gawky Jenna, on her 13th birthday, makes a wish to become older and cooler, and wakes up as a hot and successful 30-year-old who looks an awful lot like Jennifer Garner. Yet despite valiant efforts by the performers, the movie is still a botch, because nothing that happens *within* this premise works at all. Impossibly far-fetched though they were,

Big

and

Freaky Friday

(both screen versions) at least had a core of emotional truth that gave their comic scenes added depth;

13 Going on 30

is retrograde kitsch mired in stereotypes, and everything about it feels phony. The cast makes you smile occasionally, and Garner's performance is often clever, yet the film itself is incredibly shallow; it goes for all the obvious jokes and can't even present

those

effectively.

Director Gary Winick does pull off one bit of masterful comic staging – when Jenna's co-worker notices a man making eyes at Jenna and she sidles up to the wrong "man" – but the script doesn't give him many opportunities for inspiration; the screenplay is credited to Josh Goldsmith and Cathy Yuspa, whose *What Women Want* was similarly pandering and borderline offensive to its target audience.

13 Going on 30 is, depressingly, another work that contends that the only way for a woman to make a mark in business is by being a conniving, self-serving bitch – Helen Hunt played this role in *WWW*

–

unless

, of course, their love for a good man makes them realize the error of their ways. (Is Cathy

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Yuspa secretly an invented screenwriting figure, like Donald Kaufman, designed to make Goldsmith look less misogynistic than he actually is?) This is a hopelessly antiquated notion, but much about the movie's timeline feels a little screwy – the film is firmly set in 2004, and it's been established that 17 years have passed since young Jenna made her fated wish: Would even the dorkiest of teens have been rapturously in love with Rick Springfield and "Thriller" in 1987?

Bless the cast for doing what they can. Although she made me laugh out loud only once – after an amorous suitor nuzzles up to Jenna and she lets loose a series of repulsed giggles – Garner shows terrific raw skill as a comedienne, Mark Ruffalo displays a warm, relaxed sweetness, and Judy Greer and Andy Serkis deliver sharp caricatures, although I worry about future casting for this Man Who Was Gollum; Serkis might become the snippy British character actor directors go to when they can't get Rowan Atkinson. The talents of the performers make *13 Going on 30* play far better than it has any right to, but the effect is like putting a bandage on a severed limb – it can only do so much.



THE PUNISHER

As befits the relentlessly grim comic-book character the film is based on, Jonathan Hensleigh's *The Punisher*

is a relentlessly grim movie experience, two hours plus of savagery, beatings, and torture. (In our current movie climate, it should gross \$375 million.) An ultra-macho revenge melodrama – and, to my knowledge, the first re-make of a Dolph Lundgren vehicle – this adaptation of the Marvel comic is marginally effective, I guess, but so void of variety and levity that it's more exhausting than engaging; even the film's scenes of supposed comic relief feel unusually heavy-spirited. After his entire family is gunned down by the hired goons of ruthless businessman Howard Saint (John Travolta), retired FBI agent Frank Castle (Tom Jane) seeks payback as The Punisher, whose steely-eyed determination and utter humorlessness somehow compensate for his complete lack of super-powers. That's pretty much it story-wise, except for the aforementioned "comic relief," which involves Castle's grudging friendship with a downtrodden waitress (Rebecca Romijn-Stamos) and her neighbors: a loveable tubby (Jon Pinette) and a loveable slacker with his face pierced (Ben Foster).

Garner's Pluck Can't Salvage "13 Going on 30": Also, "The Punisher" and "Connie & Carla"

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Hensleigh stages the action scenes with brutal competence – he could have made a fortune dishing out this kind of crap in the '70s – but he doesn't seem to have been properly introduced to human beings yet; nothing that happens in *The Punisher* carries any weight because you don't have any feeling, good or ill, toward anyone onscreen. Stripped of the edgy charm he brought to

Boogie Nights, *Deep*

Blue Sea

and

*61**

, Jane gives a lazy, dull performance here, and the rest of the cast matches him in the going-through-the-motions vacuity of their work. (Hensleigh does score with his deliberate, mysterious introduction of Saint's Lady MacBeth-ish wife, played by Laura Harring; too bad Harring's line readings are reminiscent of the worst of Ali MacGraw.) You can forgive the film's inanity and distracting plot convolutions – such are the perils of the comic-book adaptation – but the movie just isn't any

fun

, despite the entertainment of watching the filmmakers distance themselves from The Punisher's "costume," which consists of a long leather coat and a garage-sale T-shirt with a skull on it. Hensleigh seems so embarrassed by the

couture

that it makes perfect sense for him to keep Jane shirtless for three-fourths of the movie.



CONNIE & CARLA

Connie & Carla feels like a relic from the early '80s – 1982, to be exact, when we *first* saw *Victor/Victoria*

– yet it made me laugh out loud a

lot

; as we all know, one's personal experiences directly affect one's

movie

experiences, and in this case, I'm on the right side of the film's inside jokes. In this umpteenth variant on

Some Like It Hot

, Nia Vardalos and Toni Collette play aspiring performers who witness a murder and evade the

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killers by posing as men in a West Hollywood drag show, and although I haven't spent any professional or personal time wearing a dress, I

have

spent more than a decade working in dinner theatre; for those in the know,

Connie & Carla

's cheesy Broadway medleys and jabs at professional "dinnertainment" are a source of endless mirth. (In the film's funniest running gag, a Russian hit man searches for the duo in dinner theatres across America, and every single one of them is producing

Mame

.) The movie is no more than an extended, one-joke sitcom, overflowing with calculated life lessons about Tolerance and Being Yourself, but the actors, including David Duchovny and the superb Stephen Spinella, play it earnestly, and Vardalos and Collette, delivering ripe comic portrayals, sing the hell out of their numbers.

Connie & Carla

might not be very good, but if Vardalos and Collette ever take their crap-tacular

Cats

-meets-

Funny Girl

-meets-

Jesus Christ Superstar

act on the road, I'm getting tickets.