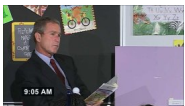


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FAHRENHEIT 9/11

I have several friends, including professed liberals, who can't stand Michael Moore, and it's not hard to see why: Even if you're on-board with Moore's politics, his glibness, bullying tactics, self-promotion, relentless simplifying, and anything-for-a-laugh gags can get in the way of his Bigger Picture, to the point where his methods overcome his message.

I acquiesce to these complaints yet couldn't care less about them, because Moore is one of only a handful of American directors still making movies that actually *matter*. Michael Moore is not a subtle man, and his movies aren't subtle, either. Barring the larkish, mostly lightweight

The Big One

, his cinematic works are comically vicious attacks on elements of American culture that Moore believes require immediate change; they're messy, anarchistic, and practically pulsating with righteous indignation. (He's pissed off, and can't believe that our country's leaders aren't as pissed as he is.) That's why much of

Fahrenheit 9/11

is so startling, not because Moore's anger has been tempered, but because he has such an astounding variety of film footage at his disposal that he doesn't have to work as hard as he has in the past; for large portions of the movie, Moore simply lets his images and sound bites speak for themselves, without flippant commentary, and the results are often staggeringly effective.

Fahrenheit 9/11

will, it's becoming apparent, prove to be a landmark film for many reasons, yet what makes it such a *good*

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 29 June 2004 18:00

film is Moore's trust in his material and, by extension, his audience. He'll probably never rise above the cheap jokes he's so fond of (such as the guitar riff from "Cocaine" underscoring a passage on President Bush's tenure in Texas), but with

Fahrenheit 9/11

, Moore has moved beyond his role as left-wing provocateur and polemicist and become, at last, an artist.

Let's be clear: *Fahrenheit 9/11* is, first and foremost, Moore's attempt to unite the country toward a common goal – thwarting President Bush's re-election campaign – and after seeing the movie, with its shockingly unflattering (and often hysterical) film clips, even die-hard Bush supporters might find many of his actions and speeches repugnant. But as the film's larger scope is eventually revealed – when Moore begins taking a hard look at the tragic inevitability of our current war in Iraq –

Fahrenheit 9/11 achieves a primal power that audiences might not be prepared for. During

Fahrenheit

's final third, Moore has all but vanished from the film, replaced by the voices of those serving overseas and the loved ones they left behind, and their heartbreaking eloquence arrives like a slap in the face; Moore himself, as he should, appears cowed by the sacrifices made by so many, and for so little purpose. The movie winds up being

deeply

patriotic; Moore is saying: This war is killing our kids, and it has to stop. What makes the film inspirational, rather than an exercise in comic futility, is Moore's assurance that it

can

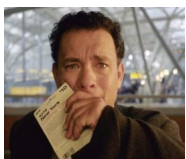
be stopped – at the voting booths in November. With

Fahrenheit 9/11

, Michael Moore has tapped into the American

zeitgeist

in a way that even he might not have intended; the film is both hugely entertaining and deeply moving and, whether you're a Moore fan or not, it demands to be seen.



THE TERMINAL

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 29 June 2004 18:00

So few movies this year have been blessed with first-rate directors at the helm that, for the first reel or so, Steven Spielberg's craftsmanship in *The Terminal* is enough to put you at ease. In this comic fable, Tom Hanks plays Viktor Navorski, a traveler from a (fictional) eastern European country who finds himself trapped in the JFK airport when his homeland is embroiled in a military coup. Neither able to return home nor allowed to step on American soil, Viktor becomes a virtual prisoner of the airport, and

The Terminal

shows how Viktor, with no money and only a rudimentary understanding of English, not only survives his detainment but emerges as the airport's unofficial, beloved mascot. It's a charming notion for a light-comic exercise, and although the setup is a tad farfetched and Tom Hanks, despite a serviceable accent, doesn't seem the least bit eastern-European, you're eager to see how the scenario plays out, and what surprises Spielberg and company will bring to the material.

Sadly, surprises aren't on the agenda. We watch as Viktor gradually acclimates himself to his new environment (the scenes of him learning to survive on intuition and good sense suggest *Cast Away*

without the volleyball), endears himself to the colorful airport staff, enjoys a romantic dalliance with a ditzy flight attendant (Catherine Zeta-Jones, too intelligent for her role), and thwarts the selfish machinations of an odious security chief (Stanley Tucci, in an obvious, unappealing performance); this isn't a film script so much as a pilot for an airport-bound take-off on *Northern Exposure*

. The whole film is presented with dull competence and little variety; despite Spielberg's considerable talents and Hanks' charisma, you begin to feel that you, too, have been trapped in JFK for months. (Several sequences, like Viktor's attempts to play matchmaker for Diego Luna's food-service worker, go on for so long that they feel like intentional padding, and at 130 minutes,

The Terminal

doesn't

need

padding.)

The Terminal

isn't a bad movie, but it's a dawdling and listless one, further proof that charm alone can't compensate for a total lack of purpose.



Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 29 June 2004 18:00

DODGEBALL: A TRUE UNDERDOG STORY

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story would be unimaginable without Ben Stiller. Actually, that's not true: It's *completely* imaginable, as the umpteenth variant on *The Bad News Bears*, in which a group of shlubby losers become sports heroes through sheer pluck and determination. But Stiller takes the movie to an entirely different comic plane. Playing a repellantly fatuous fitness guru, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Tony Robbins (one of Stiller's finest caricatures from his short-lived TV series), Stiller hasn't been this inspired since his wildly underrated *Zoolander*

performance. This fool takes every character's utterance to him as either a sexual invitation or a threat, and his character is so unapologetically self-serving that he explodes every scene he's in; he's as hilarious a nemesis as you could hope for. If only the rest of

Dodgeball

had Stiller's comic drive! Unfortunately, the movie is terribly made, the script is too focused on the losers' inherent sweetness, and unless you're Homer Simpson, the sight of a guy getting hit in the nuts with a dodgeball loses its edge when repeated a 50th time. (Though, as the movie makes clear, a guy getting hit in the face with a wrench is

always

funny.) There are still sporadic laughs when Stiller's not around – Vince Vaughn has a winningly relaxed, off-the-cuff comic style and, through natural talent, Rip Torn and Jason Bateman make their unamusing roles pretty damned amusing – but only when he's onscreen does

Dodgeball

give you reason to cheer.