

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 17 August 2004 18:00

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## **COLLATERAL**

*Collateral's* plot is so High Concept you can barely believe it hasn't been filmed before: A cab driver (Jamie Foxx) unknowingly picks up a hired assassin (Tom Cruise) as a fare, and spends a long, strange evening chauffeuring him from one execution site to another, all the while trying to prevent the killer from performing his rounds without, of course, getting himself killed in the process.

As in most High Concept works, the film's sheer volume of contrivances and coincidences is off-the-charts, and the basic situation is already far too sitcom-cute; Cruise's character, it turns out, is an exceptionally verbose and well-read contract killer, one who references Darwin and expounds on the meaninglessness of life, and Foxx's driver is a stereotypical Everyman hero, imagining his life as a limousine-rental tycoon with passenger's seats free of sandwich droppings. Can two grown men share a taxicab without driving each other crazy?

Leave it to director Michael Mann to not only pull this off, but to pull it off *spectacularly* well; from first shot to last, and with minimal help from the script, Mann's work is absolutely superlative. Using hand-held cameras and high-definition video, Mann gives

*Collateral*

's L.A. a jazzy, palpably creepy sense of danger, and his action scenes are undeniably exciting, yet he's also a humane enough director to slow the action down for marvelous work from the likes of Mark Ruffalo, Irma P. Hall, and the great Javier Bardem, and he refuses to let either Foxx or Cruise grandstand; the actors resist their more egotistical performance urges and make memorable sparring partners. (Cruise is always a better actor when he's not the whole show.)

Mann can't quite compensate for the formulaic ending or the complete lack of surprise as to who Cruise's final intended victim is, but he succeeds in making

*Collateral*

a topnotch summertime entertainment, and one of the very few to bear the stamp of a genuinely visionary helmer.

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### **LITTLE BLACK BOOK**

Can Brittany Murphy be stopped? Please? She has definite charisma and even talent, but lately she's been so robotically, aggressively *on* – giggling like a teenybopper, bravely smiling through tears, pratfalling herself into a concussion – that you tire of her shtick even

*before*

she's brought out her full performance arsenal. She's become her own cheering section; it's as if Brittany Murphy and Brittany Murphy's

*fan club*

were squeezed into one tiny frame.

*Little Black Book*

would be a mess even without her – the movie is a bizarre hybrid of

*My Best Friend's Wedding*

and

*Network*

(!) – but with Ms. Murphy bouncing off the scenery it often borders on the embarrassing.

Thankfully, she's been cast opposite some performers who refuse to be intimidated by her sociopathic pluckiness: Holly Hunter uses her directness and irreverent line readings to create a surprisingly complex character, Ron Livingston has his ruffled teddy-bear charm, and Julianne Nicholson, as one of Murphy's romantic rivals, is sensible and effortlessly touching – a real find.

*Little Black Book*

is barely more than an ego trip masquerading as a star vehicle, and you wind up thankful to the supporting actors for reminding us – and Ms. Murphy should take notes here – that a performer can often make a fine impression by simply not

*trying*

so damned hard.



### **DE-LOVELY**

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I'm not sure what I expected from *De-Lovely*, but I certainly didn't expect it to be lifeless. The film, after all, is a musical biography of legendary composer Cole Porter (played here by Kevin Kline), who wrote some of the smartest, wittiest, and most romantic songs of all time, and despite having endured a crippling riding accident that eventually required amputation, the Porter we see onscreen appears to have been a very happy individual. Adored by his wife, Linda, (Ashley Judd), worshipped by the public, wealthy beyond measure, and absolutely unconflicted about his homosexuality (which Linda accepts

*almost*

without complaint), Porter is the luckiest of men and knows it; the joy in his lyrics, it's implicit, stems directly from his joy in life. An evening of beautifully performed Cole Porter music is enough to enthral any theatre audience, and

*De-Lovely*

is chockablock with Porter tunes, performed by Kline and recording artists such as Elvis Costello and Sheryl Crow. So why is the movie so deathly dull?

Well, despite a mildly diverting framing device wherein an aged Porter re-lives his life alongside Jonathan Pryce's theatrical puppetmaster – and a heavily made-up Kline does some of his finest, subtlest screen acting in these scenes – the story unfolds with uninspired, serviceable banality, and, Kline excepted, the performers fail to make an impression; the drapes in the Porters' various living rooms are more expressive than the majority of the supporting cast. But we could forgive any number of bland expository sequences and weak actors if the musical numbers were at least sharp, and this, alas, is really where *De-Lovely* becomes *De-Languid*. Director Irwin Winkler doesn't appear to have any style for the genre – the camera always appears to be exactly where you

*don't*

want it to be – and it feels as if every song is being performed at about half-tempo; even the numbers that should be surefire ("Anything Goes," "Blow, Gabriel, Blow") come off as unusually lethargic. In the end,

*De-Lovely*

resembles nothing so much as a tony TV movie, adequate enough as a biography but missing all the

*joie de vivre*

the material cries out for.



**COFFEE & CIGARETTES**

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And the award for The Year's Least Misleading Title goes to Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee & Cigarettes*, a compilation of cinematic short stories about ... coffee and cigarettes. Seriously. Coolly shot in black-and-white, the film features nearly a dozen (mostly comedic) encounters between random eccentrics over smokes and cups o' joe, and the film, with its rhythmic, elliptical conversations and martini-dry wit, has a smooth, light touch that's often quite pleasing. As these short-story narratives usually are, *Coffee & Cigarettes* is a hit-or-miss affair, and the film has the misfortune of opening with a really *big* miss; it's hard enough to deal with Steven Wright and Roberto Benigni on their own, let alone playing off one another for seven interminable minutes. Yet there's also an upshot to the cinematic-short-stories format: You aren't much bothered when a particular segment sucks, because a new one will begin soon enough. So even though you have to endure an occasional bummer like the Wright/Benigni piece, you also get Tom Waits and Iggy Pop, and Alfred Molina and Steve Coogan, and Bill Murray, RZA, and GZA, and Cate Blanchett playing opposite herself as lookalike cousins, and several other very amusing vignettes. Now showing at the Brew & View, *Coffee & Cigarettes* is a terrifically laid-back experience – one imagines that Jarmusch would *love* the venue it's currently playing at – and, coming near the end of yet another summer of Hollywood bombast, it's just the tonic that many of us are in desperate need of.