

"Team America: World Police" Surprisingly on-Target: Also, "Control Room" and "Taxi"

Written by Mike Schulz

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TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE

There are so many satirical objects in *Team America: World Police*, and so many different levels of parody going on at once, that the movie was almost guaranteed to be a mess, and indeed, a few of its stances – particularly those against knee-jerk Hollywood liberals – come off as a little weak.

Yet the film is a *brilliant* mess, overreaching, yes, but incredibly smart and, at times, painfully funny; whenever a particular gag fails, it almost comes off as a reprieve, because the movie is getting about four things right for every one that goes wrong. By now, most everyone is aware that this is the latest cinematic contribution by *South Park's* Trey Parker and Matt Stone, wherein a group of heroic freedom fighters tries to win the war on terror, hampered only by their

very

questionable combat skills – in two sequences, they “accidentally” obliterate Paris and Cairo – and the fact that they’re, you know, marionettes. What Parker (who directs the film) and Stone are up to here is nothing less than a full-bodied assault on everyone and everything connected to the war in Iraq, but not in the ways you might expect; you’ll find no caricatures, for instance, of Bush or Kerry, and Iraq is actually mentioned only in passing (as a country that Sean Penn once visited). Yet there’s no denying that the team’s America-first zealotry is meant to mirror the

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climate of our times, and politically, the film offers some surprisingly trenchant insights; a rousing late-film speech, equating the world's players to three specific (and unmentionable) body parts, has the sort of populist appeal that Ross Perot's speechwriters could only have dreamt of.

The film's political critique is oftentimes withering, yet *Team America* succeeds most spectacularly, and almost unequivocally, as a parody of ultra-macho, testosterone-dripping, mid-'80s entertainments of the

Top Gun

and

Rambo

variety. Fueled by Harry Gregson-Williams' gleefully hyperbolic score (it brings to mind Andy Warhol's quote that the greatest parody of a thing is the thing itself),

Team America

gets every last nuance of this mostly disreputable genre: the obvious staging, the gung-ho earnestness of the dialogue, the goofily inevitable love sequence (presented here in a minute-long montage that would give Alfred Kinsey the shakes), the not-quite-buried homoeroticism, the tragic fall from grace, the ass-kicking finale. There's plenty to laugh at throughout

Team America: World Police

– all the musical numbers, especially the oft-repeated theme song "America – F-ck Yeah!" and a shockingly mean-spirited lampoon of Broadway's

Rent

, are winners – but it's the

intelligence

behind the jokes that makes this the most satisfying broad comedy of the year.



CONTROL ROOM

As if our current administration didn't have enough to contend with, cinematically, *vis à vis Team America*

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Fahrenheit 9/11

, and the straight-to-DVD docs of Robert Greenwald (*Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War*

, *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*

), they're also essential figures in Jehane Noujaim's *Control Room*

, a documentary about the Arab television station Al Jazeera. Reaching an audience of some 40 million Arab viewers, Al Jazeera has been routinely denounced by Donald Rumsfeld as a hotbed of inaccuracy and anti-American sentiment, and this denunciation was especially pointed during the initial stages of the war in Iraq;

Control Room

begins shortly before the "shock and awe" attack on Baghdad, and continues until just after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in the city square and the president's "Mission Accomplished" press conference, when we, along with Al Jazeera producers and reporters, were beginning to sense how little of our mission had actually

been

accomplished.

Viewed strictly as a behind-the-scenes look at Al Jazeera's daily operations, *Control Room*, currently playing at the Brew & View, is rather lacking, at least to audiences (myself included) for whom this is a first intensive exposure to the station. The list of things we

don't

learn about Al Jazeera might, in fact, be longer than the list of things we

do

: How is the station funded? What is the hierarchy of power there? Is there, indeed, an anti-American bias at the station, or is its coverage merely a retaliation against the selected coverage of the American media? You keep wishing for more information from

Control Room

than you ever get, yet what keeps the film fascinating is Noujaim's focus on three of Al Jazeera's key participants: Samir Khader, a world-weary producer with dreams of a future working for Fox News; Hassan Ibrahim, a British reporter who openly mocks American reasoning for war; and Lt. Josh Rushing, a Marine press officer who wants desperately to understand the Arabic mindset yet fiercely supports American policy. As the war progresses, you appreciate the contributions of these individuals, and the many who surround them, more and more; theirs are viewpoints not often heard in our current climate, and you feel thankful to the director and her crew for providing us with another viewpoint within this unimaginably complex situation. Noujaim could certainly have made

Control Room

a more thorough film, but it's hard to imagine her making a more

humane

one.

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TAXI

Taxi isn't the worst movie I've seen in 2004, but it might well be the stupidest. Consider: Queen Latifah stars as a bike messenger who dreams of making it as a professional NASCAR driver, and who trains for her future career by zipping through the streets of Manhattan in a turbocharged taxicab. Jimmy Fallon plays a dunderheaded cop attempting to thwart a series of bank robberies perpetrated by a quartet of Portuguese-speaking supermodels. (If I stopped detailing the plot right now, *Taxi* would already rank as one of the most ridiculous cinematic works in eons, but just for fun, let's forge ahead) Because he is perhaps the worst driver in the history of the NYPD, if not the entire universe, Fallon totals his squad car, and winds up continuing his pursuit of the larcenous vixens after commandeering Queen Latifah's cab. The duo initially hates one another, yet they begin to forge a tentative friendship, and thanks to the Queen's surprising fluency in Portuguese

Nope. Sorry. This is too inane for words.

With a set-up like this, there was no way on earth a *good* movie was going to result, so let's just be grateful for its small pleasures: Ann-Margret earns a chuckle or two as Fallon's blowzy drunkard of a mother, and whenever the leads share a moment of relaxed joshing – and much of this dialogue sounds improvised – they play off one another well; you sense *The Chemistry That Might Have Been* if they weren't being undone by fourth-rate material. The staggeringly mindless *Taxi* feels just like the sort of mid-'80s action-comedy buddy picture you accidentally stumble upon on Starz at 3 a.m. – Is it a sign of Hollywood "progress" that the token Black Partner to the White Cop is now played by a *woman*? – and now that Trey Parker and Matt Stone have effectively annihilated the descendants of *Top Gun*, maybe they can set their sights on all the bastard children of *48 HRS.*