Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 16 November 2004 18:00

BRIDGET JONES: THE EDGE OF REASON

I have a friend who does a bit based on a seminal *Laverne & Shirley* gag. In nearly every episode of that sitcom, one of the titular characters would say, “There’s no way this situation could get worse!” or “What’s that smell?” and Lenny and Squiggy would cluelessly burst through Laverne’s and Shirley’s door; if someone around us says something like “That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen!” my friend will mime a door opening and exclaim, with perfect greaser-nerd cadence, “Hello!” That gag is pure sitcom-honed irony – that is,
obvious
irony – and
Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason
, the follow-up to 2001’s
Bridget Jones’s Diary
, is like a continuous loop of that Lenny and Squiggy routine.

In scene after scene, Helen Fielding’s hefty heroine (again played by Renee Zellweger) will ashamedly mutter “Thank God that’s the worst of today’s humiliations” or some such thing, and in the next shot, she’ll inevitably find some way to make a public ass out of herself; I wasn’t surprised that this warhorse joke was still being employed with depressing regularity, but I was shocked that numerous members of the audience were actually still *laughing* at it. It’s as if they’d never *seen* a sitcom.

That might be a pretty fair indication of the amount of goodwill audiences bring to *The Edge of Reason* .
Many viewers were so thoroughly charmed by the original, and Zellweger’s portrayal of Bridget in particular, that they really want this new entry to be terrific; they’ll happily sit through even bum jokes and contrived situations if it means spending more time with a character they adore. (It’s the way some of us now watch
Joey
.) I was a fan of the original myself, and it’s true that you enter the movie with hope, not just because of Zellweger, but because that whole gang of superior British talent – Hugh Grant, Colin Firth, Jim Broadbent, Gemma Jones, and Shirley Henderson, among others – is back, too. And they do their best. But watching
Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason

is like watching a sensational cast in a really bad sitcom; instead of making the bad jokes sound better, you feel the actors wilting under the oppressiveness of their crummy material. Not having read the Helen Fielding books, I have no idea how much of the screenplay is lifted directly from its source material, but I'm guessing quite a lot, considering that Fielding is listed among the screenwriters. (The script credit goes to Fielding, Andrew Davies, Richard Curtis, and Adam Banks, all of whom appear to have contributed one joke apiece.) In that case, I'll venture to say that there's nothing all that wrong with
The Edge of Reason
that couldn't have been fixed by completely chucking the novel it was based on.

This new work isn't so much a sequel to *Bridget Jones's Diary* as it is a *de facto* remake. Despite the fact that the 2001 film gave us a pretty conclusive Happily Ever After ending, and the new work opens with a fairly optimistic Bridget, in no time at all she's back to square one – hopelessly glum and insecure and pigging out on Ben & Jerry's. Now it can be argued that that's how audiences
want
their Bridget, and many of Beeban Kidron's directorial decisions back up that thesis; Kidron appears to relish the opportunity to cover her star in pig excrement or film her in the most unflattering of angles. (At times, Kidron's approach seems an almost diabolical attempt to humiliate not just Bridget, but Zellweger herself; in one scene, where Bridget is splashing around at the beach, Zellweger – far heavier than the character's conception requires – is photographed so cruelly that the audience actually gasped.) Yet this Bridget's Greatest Hits approach makes the movie slack and repetitive: Do we really need to view the whole process of Bridget finding her self-esteem
again
?

The Edge of Reason reeks of desperation, as if Fielding didn't have a clue about what to do with her characters next and decided, instead, to have them repeat their signature shtick. Hugh Grant's cad, Daniel, is trotted out again just so he can break Bridget's heart in exactly the same way he did before; Colin Firth's sweetheart, Mark Darcy, has to be so politely, pathologically stuffy that his limited conversation allows Bridget to make all sorts of incorrect assumptions; Bridget's parents are given another minor comic subplot, this one about renewing their marital vows. (Jim Broadbent looks appropriately miserable in a lavender tux.) These elements are indistinguishable from the ones that made *Bridget Jones's Diary* a hit, and they might do the same box-office trick for the sequel, yet as presented here, they're devoid of wit and enthusiasm and, most of all, surprise; for its entire running length,
Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason
feels more like a contract obligation than a continuation.

THE POLAR EXPRESS

The first five minutes of Robert Zemeckis' computer-animated *The Polar Express* are magnificently, blessedly quiet. Set in a little boy's bedroom in a sleepy Midwestern town, this prologue gives off a warm holiday glow and, with minimal treacle, sets us up for the plot, which will involve the boy reaffirming his faith in Santa and understanding the true spirit of Christmas. It's kids' stuff, of course, but it's beautifully designed kids' stuff (though computer-generated humans will always be rather off-putting), alluring and suggestive and just a tad spooky, and you're reminded of the exquisite grace that Zemeckis can bring to scenes featuring minimal sound, from the astronomical, receding-through-time opening of
Contact
to Tom Hanks' hilltop view of his surroundings in
Cast Away
. Enjoy the silence while it lasts. The 90 minutes that follow are a grating blend of the hyperactive and the maudlin, and any sweetness inherent in the Chris Van Allsburg children's book the movie is based on is totally lost. Zemeckis, as many helmers of family films do, assumes a short attention span on the part of his audience, so every few minutes involve a new cliffhanger or video-game-esque action sequence, and the film features so many shots of the locomotive speeding like a roller coaster through perilous curves and precipitous drops that you feel like never visiting an amusement park again. All this is only slightly less painful than Alan Silvestri's horrifically sentimental score, and the only laugh I got out of the film was when two of our hero's fellow travelers launched into a hysterically inappropriate pop ballad with such Broadway-baby "soul" that they appear to be auditioning for Cosette and Gavroche in a CGI production of
Les Miz
.

ALFIE

Jude Law has charm to spare, as do Susan Sarandon, Marisa Tomei, Nia Long, and Jane Krakowski, but Charles Shyer's *Alfie* remake has nothing to offer *but* charm; in the 38 years since the 1966 original, its observations about serial lotharios and needy women have lost their freshness and bite – there's nothing here you wouldn't find on any given episode of *Sex & The City* – and the addressing-the-camera angle has been overused in dozens of movies and sitcoms. Shyer's film is, at best, pleasant, but there's no earthly reason for it to exist. (They should have changed the opening lyric of the film's title song to "What's the freakin' point, Alfie?") And besides, there's actually a pretty terrific *Alfie* remake already out there, hilarious and moving and chockfull of truthful insight into the male psyche. It's called *High Fidelity*.