

As Hollywood romantic comedies go, the Will Smith vehicle *Hitch* isn't bad, which, unfortunately, isn't the same as actually being *good* 

. But judging by the film's sensational box-office intake – not to mention the enthusiastic audience response at the screening I attended (people actually applauded throughout) – no one seems much bothered by the movie's mediocrity; many viewers prefer a romantic comedy that doesn't challenge or excite them in the least to films such as

Before Sunset

and

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

and

Sideways

, works that understand and explore the nature of romance in ways that feel revelatory.

Despite the considerable efforts of Smith and co-star Kevin James to elevate their material, I'm not sure I believed one single scene in *Hitch*, yet that might be part of its mass-audience appeal: The movie, though set in the "real" world, is pure fantasy, as removed from actual human experience as the

Star Wars or Lord of the films.

Hitch

tells us that all it takes to turn a frog into a prince is perseverance and a little guidance from Will Smith, and while this is, indeed, a sweet notion, it's also a crock. A *romantic* 

crock, yes, but still a crock.

Smith plays Alex Hitchins, a New Yorker who maintains a very comfortable lifestyle by serving as the city's unofficial (and anonymous) matchmaker for schlubby male urbanites. In love with a gorgeous woman who's way out of your league and would never give you the time of day? Hitch'll make it happen. His latest project is Albert (James), a chubby, nebbishy accountant in love with a beautiful heiress, Allegra (Amber Valletta), and while Hitch plays cupid for the unlikely duo, he also finds himself falling for a gossip columnist (Eva Mendes) whose latest tabloid story winds up involving Allegra, Albert, and even Hitch himself. Can true love conquer the cynicism and neuroses of the modern-day dating scene?

Well, of course: That's what *happens* in Hollywood romances. (No one goes to a movie like *Hitc h* 

for the

surprises

.) Generally, the best you can hope for from works in this genre is some inspired badinage between the paramours and maybe a few laughs here and there, and it would be nice to say that, on these levels at least,

Hitch

delivers. But the dalliance between Smith and Mendes is feisty without being particularly entertaining – Mendes, playing an uptight neurotic, is pitched too high and gives a mostly unconvincing performance – and James and Valletta have very little to do together; the movie, so busy employing its characters as pawns in a typically convoluted screwball plot, doesn't have the patience for elements like romantic chemistry, and there aren't nearly enough light, throwaway moments tangential to the plotting. Director Andy Tennant gives everything a professional-looking sheen and it's never downright dull, but *Hitch* 

is a soulless contraption, as much a generic Hollywood blockbuster as one of Will Smith's traditional midsummer blow-'em-ups.

So why is this movie such a big hit (besides, of course, the fact that it's one of the few 2005 releases thus far that isn't *completely* awful)? The obvious answer is, of course, "Will Smith," and he does provide the movie charm to spare; it's been so long since we've seen him *without* 

a gun in his hands - and

Shark Tale

doesn't count – that it's easy to forget what a relaxed, enjoyable presence he can be. Yet I think what viewers are most responding to in

Hitch

is the confidence and go-for-broke spirit of Kevin James, a rare sitcom actor with ... not depth exactly, but definite talent and sincerity; even though he's stuck with too many gags that make fun of his obesity – most of his routines in

Hitch

are "funny" simply because it's a fat man doing them – James performs them with true joie de vivre

- . He and Smith make large segments of this aimless movie work through sheer force of personality, and in a by-the-numbers romantic comedy such as *Hitch*
- , that's a nearly heroic accomplishment.



THE WEDDING DATE

Like *Hitch*, *The Wedding Date* has a storyline that's too cute for words – afraid of arriving alone at her sister's English wedding, Debra Messing hires male escort Dermot Mulroney to pose as her beau, and the two, inevitably, fall in love – but it's an even weaker effort, with awkward exposition, borderline incoherent editing, and nothing in the way of sizzle between the leads. (A friend of mine, appearing in a local stage production, was once dismissed by a reviewer as being "handsome but not compelling." That's Dermot Mulroney.) Yet, in many ways, it's a more *interesting* 

failure than

Hitch

. British director Clare Kilner doesn't appear to have much natural instinct for pacing or performers – Messing is certainly more agreeable here than she has been on Will & Grace

of late, but that's not saying much – yet the film has more melancholy tones than we're used to experiencing in movies of its ilk. There's a genuine, grown-up sadness to many of its scenes, and even though the plotting is standard stuff, elements of the film do stick with you, such as the lingering resentment between the sisters and the hopelessness of feeling that your one true love might have actually gotten away. Kilner might not be the best choice for romantic comedies, but if she ever tries her hand at a Charlotte Bronte adaptation, I'm there.



THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

Walter Salles' *The Motorcycle Diaries* is terrifically likable, which is perhaps the last thing you'd expect from a biopic about Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara. Of course, the film doesn't concern itself with Guevara's accomplishments in the 1960s, but rather the trek he took through South America in 1952 – when he was still referred to as Ernesto Guevara de la Serna – alongside his best friend and traveling companion, Alberto Granado. During their extended,

continental road trip, Ernesto (Gael Garcia Bernal) and Alberto (Rodrigo de la Serna) meet and aid numerous villagers – both men were studying to be doctors – and the aching humanity of those he met, not to mention the depths of poverty he witnessed, drove the young Guevara to a life of battling oppression and fighting for the rights of the disenfranchised. Based on Guevara's biographical account of the journey,

The Motorcycle

Diaries

Oscar-nominated screenplay by Jose Rivera, could have used more edge, more parallels between the man Guevara was in 1952 and the man he would one day become. And Gael Garcia Bernal, while a fine actor, is too reticent here. His earnestness is undeniable, but he's missing the passion that would inspire such a radical change of character; Bernal, with his matinee-idol looks, is too Rob Lowe-lite for the film's good. (An end title card explaining Guevara's eventual metamorphosis into activist might be greeted by viewers unaware of his later accomplishments with a resounding "Huh?") Yet the movie has a hushed, entrancing beauty that's quite spellbinding – the black and white shots of those whom the duo encounters are stunning – and it maintains a frisky, adventurous spirit, with a great deal of welcome rude humor. (Kudos to film novice de la Serna, who gives a lived-in, thoroughly joyous performance as Alberto.) Those looking for more piercing insight into Guevara's character may want to wait for the forthcoming Guevara biopic from Steven Soderbergh, but

The Motorcycle Diaries

– just released video and DVD – is, even with its limited perspective, a surprisingly intoxicating trip.