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FEVER PITCH

As long as there's a Hollywood, there will be a surfeit of romantic comedies, but when was the last time you saw one that was as charming and magical as it *pretended* to be? Granted, *Hitch* made oodles of money, but the platonic love between Will Smith and Kevin James was more engaging than either of their characters' eventual hook-ups, and *The Wedding Date*, in which Debra Messing and Dermot Mulroney made flirtation look like an act of desperation, was just slightly less romantic than any given episode of *Will & Grace*.

Fever Pitch, from those vanguards of the vulgar, Peter and Bobby Farrelly, isn't a very good movie; it's sloppy and inconsistent and poorly staged. But it's a pretty great date movie and a terrific pop entertainment, and its stars, Drew Barrymore and Jimmy Fallon, form the most comically beguiling screen romance the major studios have given us in many a moon. In perhaps no genre outside of romantic comedy can a film get away with so little artistry yet be so consistently pleasurable; despite following a *pro forma* Hollywood blueprint, the sweetness and sincerity of *Fever Pitch* don't feel the least bit calculated, and by the end, you might feel a bit embarrassed by how

invested you've become in it.
Fever Pitch
is something you almost never see: An adorable movie that you
don't
want to slap.

Barrymore plays Lindsey Meeks, a well-to-do, workaholic business consultant exhausted by the dating scene. Fallon plays Ben Wrightman, an adorable ninth-grade geometry teacher. The two enter into a playful romance, and all goes swimmingly from October through March. After that, however, their relationship becomes threatened by the anticipated return of Ben's one true love – the Boston Red Sox. Ben's passion for baseball eclipses his interest in literally everything else – for Ben, the most meaningful elements of life are, in order of importance, "the Red Sox, sex, and breathing" – and the film, a rare work that explores a relationship through both the male and female perspectives, begs the question: How much of our former lives are we willing to give up, or grow out of, to be with the person we love?

Adapted from Nick Hornby's novel, *Fever Pitch* is a little movie that's unexpectedly large in feeling, yet the film doesn't begin very promisingly; during the first reel or so, you might be prepared for the worst. The Farrellys, of course, cemented their fame with the comic impropriety of *Dumb & Dumber* and *There's Something Like Mary*, and *Fever Pitch*'s first 20 minutes are too slapstick-heavy, with a woman falling from a gymnasium's rock wall, a teacher getting hit in the face with a football, and – in the brothers'
pièce de résistance
– the lead-up to Lindsey's and Ben's first date, which involves food poisoning and a great deal of puking. These sequences are directed with the Farrellys' typical obviousness, and you might feel a throbbing in your temple while the standard sitcom elements fall into place: Ben leads a group of teenage charges wiser than their years, Lindsey's bitter, suspicious friends (including Ione Skye and
Hairspray
's Tony winner, Marissa Janet Winokur) wince at how little money Ben makes, et cetera. The Farrellys, as they continued to demonstrate in
Shallow Hal
and
Stuck on You
, are pretty much unparalleled at mixing queasily tasteless scenes with earnestly maudlin ones, and even when
Fever Pitch
is really working, you sense the brothers aching to win back their juvenile fan base; an intervention scene, with the recently dumped Ben despondent and his Sox-loving pals there to shake him out of his misery, is already staged crudely enough, but did we have to be told that, while forcing Ben through a shower, one of his friends found it necessary to shave Ben's

testicles?

And yet the movie works, often marvelously well, because of how deeply the screenwriters (Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel) and the film's stars believe in this endearingly nutso romance; you can actually feel *Fever Pitch* trying to *escape* its directors, and more often than not, it succeeds. The movie is rarely laugh-out-loud funny, but the script, shaped according to Boston's miraculous 2004 season, has been rather beautifully constructed – last year's Red Sox victory was the sort of come-from-behind fairy tale that Hollywood could only dream of – and is filled with lovely touches, such as the scene of Ben taking Lindsey's parents (James B. Sikking and the much-missed Jobeth Williams) on a morning golf outing without her knowledge. Plus, in Drew Barrymore and Jimmy Fallon, the film is performed with style and comic grace. It's been quite a while since Barrymore's ebullience and natural charm haven't felt shoved down our throats – we're allowed to rediscover what an ingratiating, confident comedienne she can be – and Fallon, coming off the debauchery that was *Taxi*, is relaxed and inspired throughout, an effortlessly genial leading man. (He also, in a couple of scenes, displays surprisingly strong dramatic chops.) Best of all, the movie ends with a romantic flourish that could barely be topped, involving the leads, a cell phone, a $125,000 business deal, and Fenway Park security; I can't remember the last time a movie's final romantic clinch got me all misty-eyed and wanting to cheer. It might seem, every so often, that Peter and Bobby Farrelly are trying to sabotage *Fever Pitch*, but if they can create a finale of such good-natured romantic perfection, maybe there's hope for this filmmaking team yet.

THE UPSIDE OF ANGER

The comedic family drama *The Upside of Anger*, written and directed by Mike Binder, doesn't feature any visual effects to speak of, but one particularly jaw-dropping moment did have me asking, "How did they *do* that?" Or rather, "How did *she* do that?" In the film, Joan Allen plays a wealthy suburban homemaker and mother of four daughters – so flawless in their beauty that they're inevitably played by Alicia Witt, Erika Christensen, Keri

Russell, and Evan Rachel Wood – whose husband has apparently left the family for his Swedish secretary. This turn of events makes Allen's character such a cauldron of (alcohol-induced) rage that she's no longer able to control her temper, lashing out at everyone in her path, and in one scene, her fury at daughter Christensen is so intense that Allen's neck muscles look ready to snap; never in your life have you seen anyone this close to the breaking point. The brilliance of Allen's portrayal is that she has the exquisite control to make this nightmarish character
funny
. Although much of
The Upside of Anger
is rambling and shapeless – the time shifts with disarming strangeness and the film is stuck with an unfortunate,
American Beauty
-esque framing device – it's more than worth catching for Kevin Costner's laid-back, beer-fueled goofiness (he hasn't been this enjoyable in years) and, especially, for Joan Allen, who tears through her scenes with a comic ferocity she's never displayed onscreen before. She's the unquestionable upside of this
Anger
.