

Everything About "Sahara" a Beige Bore: Also, "Bride & Prejudice" and "Bad Education"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 19 April 2005 18:00

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SAHARA

I was probably predisposed to dislike *Sahara* because of my natural aversion to Sand Movies – seeing that much beige and ochre onscreen generally puts me to sleep within five minutes – but the problems with this action-adventure don't stop with its lack of a distinctive color palette; nearly *everything* about the movie is beige.

From the film's blandly rote, sub-*Raiders* set-pieces to the serious lack of chemistry among its stars, *Sahara* is a desert-set dud, one of those lame, two-hour schedule-fillers that tend to show up on pay-cable with depressing regularity. Only in a movie season as brutally underwhelming as this one could something like *Sahara* emerge as a hit. (It's a movie for people who want a sequel to *National Treasure* right now.) With its blatant pilfering from other, better works, and a storyline that's simultaneously dense and overly complicated, the movie is an endless drag, and only some eardrum-shattering sound effects and a constant, meaningless barrage of overused pop songs keep you the least bit alert. Even the *camels* look bored.

It was with great surprise that I learned that *Sahara* is actually based on one of numerous

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adventure novels by Clive Cussler, which feature globe-hopping treasure-seeker Dirk Pitt in his search for hidden fortune. (Had I known that, I would have spent far less time hoping for Pitt to get killed off.) In this one, Pitt and his ragtag associates hunt for a priceless American Civil War artifact that has found its way to Africa, all the while dealing with a treacherous plague, an imperious admiral (William H. Macy, emerging unscathed), and the machinations of the effete French entrepreneur (Lambert Wilson) masterminding a fiendish global epidemic. That's more than enough to sustain your average blockbuster, and I suppose it's easy to see how this could translate into a suitably outsized entertainment. Yet I'm guessing that Cussler's yarns, for all their cinematic potential, aren't terribly well-regarded in Hollywood, because why else would we be stuck here with Matthew McConaughey?

As the movie's Indiana (Texas?) Jones wannabe, McConaughey is an unusually lethargic action hero, but at least his *teeth* are on; those gleaming choppers radiate more energy than anyone in the cast. Among a group of distinctively ill-used performers such as Glynn Turman and Delroy Lindo, Steve Zahn, as the token "funny" sidekick, is basically there to make faces – this was perhaps the first time I took no pleasure in watching him onscreen – and the dependably beautiful, dependably tedious Penelope Cruz is Pitt's damsel in distress, playing one of those uptight doctors who sports dark-rimmed eyeglasses and wears her hair in a severe bun just so we can see what a hottie she is when she *loses* the eyeglasses and severe bun. (And would it have killed the filmmakers to let Cruz's character crack a joke now and then? Until we're given evidence that she's actually *human*, audiences will never warm to Penelope Cruz.)

Unfortunately, director Breck Eisner's action scenes are as graceless as his work with *Sahara's* performers; several of them, especially the first of Pitt's many rescues of Cruz's doc, are so ridiculously convoluted that you have little choice but to howl with disbelief. Sadly, that might be the only visceral reaction you'll have to *anything* in *Sahara*.



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BRIDE & PREJUDICE

After a decade's worth of movie and television adaptations of *Sense & Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*

, not to mention "updates" such as

Clueless

, Jane Austen's works have become about as familiar, and frequently filmed, as Shakespeare's. Yet audiences still derive tremendous enjoyment from watching her intricately plotted, class-conscious storylines; Austen's romantic pairings and comically complex entanglements have an effervescent fizz, and her

de rigueu

r happy endings, which usually feature at least one wedding and throngs of kiddies skipping 'round the maypole, can be enormously satisfying. However, this particular screen genre just hit a new low with director Gurinder Chadha's

Bride & Prejudice

, which is less Jane Austen than a clunky Bollywood version of

Grease

. Setting the author's

Pride & Prejudice

in modern-day India isn't the worst of ideas – here, the novel's Elizabeth is an independent-minded looker named Lalita, and her Will Darcy is the American heir to a string of high-class hotels – and it yields some amusing throwaway bits, such as the sight of Lalita's meddlesome mother using the Internet to arrange her daughters' marriages. Besides, I applaud any filmmaker with the chutzpah to tackle an original screen musical in this day and age, even if the performers' lip-synching is embarrassing and the songs themselves feel like they were written for a grade-school pageant. (I don't think any of the lyrics here feature a word containing more than two syllables.) In any musical, high spirits alone can make up for a lot of ineptitude.

Yet you could say the same thing about *From Justin to Kelly*. *Bride & Prejudice* is awkwardly staged and incoherently edited from its first reel – numerous scenes appear to be cut short at the exact moment the

reason

for the scene is to be revealed – and although the movie would seem a natural for some tongue-in-cheek merriment on the part of the actors, the cast here looks (appropriately, it turns out) miserable. Despite possessing the kind of beauty that begat the Trojan War, Indian star Aishwarya Rai has little to do but act huffy, and Martin Henderson, who plays her Darcy (and who looks like the love child of Tom Cruise and Owen Wilson), is probably fortunate that his character is such a stiff, because he makes the simple task of smiling look positively painful. (Only the effortlessly charismatic Naveen Andrews, in a relatively minor role, makes a decent impression here.) Remember, just a few years back, when

Moulin Rouge

and

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Chicago

hinted at the glorious return of the movie musical? Works like *Bride & Prejudice* are the reason the genre became all but extinct in the first place.



BAD EDUCATION

Murder, gay sex, movie love, transsexual junkies, American pop songs, pedophilic priests, Gael Garcia Bernal in drag... ladies and gentlemen, it's Pedro Almodovar time! In his latest work, *Bad Education*

(just released on DVD and video), all of the Spanish *auteur*

's favorite motifs weave into a deliriously entertaining, formally accomplished *film noir*

that encompasses three storylines of radically alternating moods, all centered around a sad-eyed director (Fele Martinez), the young actor (Bernal) who might be the director's childhood love, and a submerged, insidious secret; it's a Spanish-language

Vertigo

with a touch of

Double Indemnity

, and more thrillingly enjoyable than anything currently playing at the cineplex. Yet again, Almodovar presents an exquisite meditation on the nature of reality versus illusion, with the onscreen events dovetailing between the two, and it's acted, shot, and scored magnificently; I was actually hoping for one final twist at the end, but it's a measure of this marvelous writer-director's talent that, like screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, he leaves you craving even more dynamic flourishes that you could possibly hope

for

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