

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 10 May 2005 18:00

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CRASH

Crash, the magnificent drama by *Million Dollar Baby* screenwriter Paul Haggis, fits alongside such sprawling, ensemble-driven works as *Grand Canyon*

, *Short Cuts*

, and

Magnolia

, movies in which plotlines dovetail within one another and themes enmesh, and where bitter, dissatisfied characters might not wind up more content than before – some might not even wind up alive – but they will definitely have shared, for better or worse, An Experience. (These characters might not receive traditional happy endings, yet they almost invariably find degrees of solace and a measure of hope.) Moviegoers who crave a clearly delineated moral to their stories can be driven batty by films of this ilk; more than once I've heard someone ask, apropos of one of these works, "But what was its

point

?"

Crash

, like its predecessors, explores characters so hungry for contact and meaning and understanding in a chaotic universe that they're ready to explode, and oftentimes do. That hunger

becomes

the point.

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Set in southern California at year's end, *Crash* features nearly two dozen major characters who encompass most every ethnicity and level of social and financial status imaginable, from street thugs to the working class to the Los Angeles district attorney himself. They couldn't be more diverse, yet they all share a mutual, barely concealed loathing of everyone else; as the D.A.'s wife reveals, "I'm angry all the time, and I don't know

why

." Many whom we meet in

Crash

are vociferous in their contempt for other races, and one of the more remarkable aspects of the film is that we

understand

that contempt, at least from their individual perspectives. (The bravura script, by Haggis and Bobby Moresco, employs a great deal of shocking dialogue, including some shockingly

funny

dialogue.) As the characters' stories merge and their defenses are dropped,

Crash

becomes larger in scope than its series of set pieces. The movie aims to be about more than tempers rising in southern California; it attempts to take the pulse of the whole

world

, where everyone is irrationally mistrustful and frightened, yet determined, no matter what the cost, to survive. (It makes sense that the movie opens with a highway nightmare and closes with a fender-bender.)

Grand ambition alone, of course, does not a grand movie make, and I'm thrilled to report that *Crash*

has been crafted with breathtaking skill. The actors – including Don Cheadle, Matt Dillon, Terrence Howard, Brendan Fraser, Jennifer Esposito, Thandie Newton, Michael Pena, Shaun Toub, and Larenz Tate – don't strike a single false note; even performers who you worry might not be able to keep up – such as Sandra Bullock, Ryan Phillippe, and rap star Chris "Ludacris" Bridges – are stunningly good. Haggis directs with incredible energy and imagination, and at least three sequences – Dillon's cop attempting to remove a passenger from an upturned car, Pena's locksmith hoping to keep store owner Toub from firing his gun, and Phillippe praying that Howard doesn't make the biggest mistake of his life – would be in a battle for the year's absolute finest. In fact, just looking at that list, with the verbs "attempting," "hoping," and "praying," gives a fair indication of the film's emotional power. The drama in

Crash

doesn't come from what the characters do but from what they're

trying

to do. Haggis and company make you empathize with everyone onscreen so completely that, in addition to being on the edge of your seat for most of the film, you can also find yourself close to tears throughout, and yet the movie is exquisitely entertaining. You're willing to take this journey with these characters because, despite

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Crash

's roller coaster of conflicting emotions and allegiances, it grants you emotional release at its close; by the end, you might find it hard to wipe the "

Damn

that was a good movie" smile from your face. As of May 6, 2005,

Crash

is the film of the year. And come December, it could very well still be.



MELINDA & MELINDA

In Woody Allen's latest, *Melinda & Melinda*, playwrights Wallace Shawn and Larry Pine are issued a challenge. Both are given the same, brief anecdote involving a woman named Melinda crashing a dinner party, and then asked: Does this story lend itself to tragedy or comedy? We watch both versions, as Pine imagines a tragic take involving the emotional conflicts of a tortured woman, and Shawn envisions a farcical one, in which the woman becomes the romantic fantasy of an out-of-work actor. So why is the dramatic segment actually funnier than the comic one?

Well, for one thing, Will Ferrell stars in the comic one, and is so egregious in his Woody Allen impersonation that he's a constant distraction. (Does Woody think his lines won't be funny if his leading actors *don't* echo his voice and mannerisms?) And for another, the arch, artificial dialogue in the dramatic segment elicits more giggles than his punchlines; I guess it was time for Woody's take on Tennessee Williams, but half of the movie is more *Streetcar*

etcar

than

Streetcar

itself. There are plenty of terrific things about *Melinda & Melinda*

. It's smooth and polished, and many of the actors, including Chloe Sevigny, Amanda Peet, Chiwetel Ejiofor, and Brooke Smith, are in fine form, with special praise going to the revelatory Radha Mitchell; she has the range to traverse from appealing ingénue to full-blown Judy Davis. As a die-hard Allen fan, I wouldn't have missed it. But the movie feels redundant and even a bit self-plagiarizing – Woody steals several lines outright from his previous works – and it ends on

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another of those pithy "Life is tragic
and
comic, so just enjoy it all" denouements. After all these years, is it still
us
he's trying to convince, or himself?



XXX: STATE OF THE UNION

XXX: State of the Union is, in many ways, so exponentially better than 2002's action-thriller *XX
X*
that it's a shame that the movie
still
mostly sucks. But, for a moment, let's look at the bright side. Lee Tamahori (
The Edge, Die Another Day
) takes over the directing reins from Rob Cohen, which is an improvement right there. Ice Cube
takes over for Vin Diesel, which is a
huge
improvement. (I admit to a feeling of
schadenfreude
every time someone here makes reference to the death of Diesel's
XXX
character, which occurs past the point of propriety.) And the first 15 minutes are as comically
thrilling as the whole movie would like to be; they're reminiscent of the ticklish pre-credits
sequences in most James Bond flicks. Yet, just like most James Bond flicks, the film never
improves on those first 15 minutes, and despite the fun that Ice Cube is clearly having,
State of the Union
becomes another series of pointless and senseless chases, explosions, and narrow escapes,
and, with Peter Strauss in the role, perhaps the phoniest President of the United States the
movies have ever given us. By the time Willem Dafoe, as the stock uber-villain, hisses, "Let's
finish this!" in the final reel, I was more than ready to agree.