Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 26 July 2005 18:00

THE ISLAND

If we absolutely must endure movies by Michael Bay, we could do a lot worse – we *have* done a lot worse – than
The Island
. As usual, there isn't a plot point or turn of character here that Bay doesn't make wincingly obvious, and, apparently, there's no getting rid of either his tiresome sentimental streak or his sniggering, insulting stabs at "humor." (When Bay attempts to be serious I giggle, and when he tries to make jokes, I go numb.) But I'd be lying if I didn't admit to being reasonably entertained by
The Island.
Bay has hold of an intriguing story idea, and even if the movie eventually turns into routine action-thriller nonsense, at least that nonsense is delivered with speed, a few memorable images, and even something resembling humanity. Like all Michael Bay movies,
The Island
runs a good bit over two hours.
Unlike
the others, I barely noticed.

As Bay has, over the years, proven almost unparalleled in his ability to strip his casts of personality, I guess it was just a matter of time before he made a film about cloning. In the film, which opens at the tail end of the 21st Century, scientists have come up with a sure-fire money-maker: The super-rich pay for the privilege of having human reproductions of themselves made, so when their organs begin to eventually falter, they can simply harvest healthy organs from one of their clones and prolong their lives. Sounds all well and good for the
uber
-wealthy, but what of their clones?
The Island
shows how one named Lincoln Six-Echo (Ewan McGregor) discovers his true nature – and the nature of the underground lair he and hundreds of other clones reside in – and attempts, with the aid of his inevitable love interest (Scarlett Johansson), to tell the outside world of their plight.

Nobody does bombast quite like Michael Bay, and what's most surprising here is that even he isn't doing bombast like Michael Bay. Though his staging is typically overblown and, as ever, *his damned camera won't stop moving*

, every now and then he gives the audience a moment to breathe in *The Island* 's luxurious strangeness, and aim for reactions that go beyond the usual " *Whoa!!!* "s he generally craves. A scene of miniature, robotic micro-sensors crawling into Lincoln's eyes is a strong, scary moment – like something out of *A Clockwork Orange* – and the shots of the "gestating" clones are sustained just long enough to be creepily suggestive; Bay actually shows some visual acumen here – even his *de rigeur* car chases are unexpectedly vibrant and legitimately thrilling. And although talented actors are generally never worse than when in a Michael Bay endeavor, McGregor gets to show some comic wit – it's about *time* that someone realized that two McGregors are more fun than just one. (Johansson appears unusually lifeless until you realize what kind of person her character is, in fact, a clone of, and then her performance becomes rather witty.) *The Island* isn't *fun* , exactly, but it's modestly clever and zips along painlessly, and it shows that even as thorough a hack as Michael Bay isn't to be completely written off just yet.

HUSTLE & FLOW

Hustle & Flow is, above all else, a pop entertainment. It's so raw in its emotions, however, that it could be easily mistaken for something far more complex, and credit for that goes to writer/director Craig Brewer, who has created a superbly realized central character, and actor Terrence Howard, who has given him his soul. The Memphis-set film concerns a middle-aged pimp and drug dealer named Djay who believes his life has reached a dead end, until he decides to take one last shot at success by recording a crunk CD, and getting it into the hands of superstar Skinny Black (Ludacris). Now, that outline makes the movie sound incredibly formulaic and high-concept – very *Hollywood*. Yet the miracle of *Hustle & Flow* is that the role of Djay has been written and performed with such ferocity and focus that you don't care about the weaknesses in the story.

The dichotomies in Djay's character are fascinating to watch; there's an early scene of him comforting a weeping infant, and his verbal anger is in complete opposition to the gentleness with which he's holding the child – it's a marvelously candid moment. Brewer provides Djay with unexpected emotional grace notes like these throughout, and Howard is riveting in every last one of them. It's a staggeringly good performance, and he's ably supported by Ludacris, Anthony Anderson, D.J. Qualls (*very* funny here), Taraji P. Henson, Taryn Madding, and the great Isaac Hayes, who play their more stereotypical roles with enthusiasm, as if these clichés had never seen the light of celluloid before. A rare sentimental movie that actually *earns* the tears you may shed at it, *Hustle & Flow* is a traditional triumph-of-the-underdog story given absolutely first-rate treatment, a summertime crowd-pleaser for people who don't *like* summertime crowd-pleasers.

WEDDING CRASHERS

Rachel McAdams is fascinating. Her lovely, naturalistic acting style and undeniable beauty gets her cast as the ingénue, but what I love about her is the sneaky subversion in her eyes, combined with that sly grin; like Parker Posey, she always seems to be *privately* amused, as if constantly giggling at the ridiculousness of the world around her. She's currently playing The Girl in the Owen Wilson / Vince Vaughn buddy comedy *Wedding Crashers*, but, sad to say, the movie isn't very funny, despite Wilson and Vaughn improvising up a storm. It's missing the high-concept highs of a gross-out farce like *There's Something About Mary* and treats its "We're getting too old for this" plotline with schmaltzy shamelessness; *Wedding Crashers* isn't bad, it's just blah. (It's also about a half hour too long.) At least Isla Fisher and Jane Seymour come off well – Christopher Walken looks more distracted than usual, perhaps because he's looking for his punchlines – and, of course, there's Rachel McAdams, who somehow makes her too-good-to-be-true character feel like an actual human being. McAdams

isn’t a major star just
yet
, but by unobtrusively whisking
Wedding Crashers
away from her co-stars, she’s already something of a magician.

MARCH OF THE PENGUINS

March of the Penguins, which chronicles the Antarctic birds’ nine-month battle for survival while they wait for their offspring to grow, is an astonishing, and wonderfully enjoyable, achievement. Documentary filmmaker Luc Jacquet gives us a host of stunning visuals – a few of the more arresting images are the types that young children, having seen the film, may carry with them for decades, the way some of us do with *The Black Stallion* – and provides a sweetly moving narrative; the film’s focus on
family
is enormously touching. Morgan Freeman narrates – as he should
every
movie – and provides often-amusing commentary, particularly when revealing how penguin and human aren’t all that different. “For three months,” we are told, “they will eat, and they will play, and in all likelihood their chicks will never see them again.” Typical.