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DEUCE BIGALOW: EUROPEAN GIGOLO

Some comedies are so colossally, ridiculously unfunny that you're left with no choice but to stare at them in abject bewilderment. To the surprise of probably no one, *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo* is such a comedy. Yet the movie – and I hesitate to call it one – is actually far more intriguing than "colossally, ridiculously unfunny" would indicate.

I spent the film's first half-hour stone-faced, astonished yet again that anyone – by which I mean Adam Sandler, Rob Schneider's screen Svengali – would find Schneider's minimal comic talents and utter lack of screen charisma and personality worthy of an entire feature-length production. I was pleasantly surprised by 2001's *The Animal*, where his inability to come off as human was kind of the *point*, but in previous and subsequent productions Schneider's been a cipher, a comic vacuum where a leading man should be.

Granted, with material and production as insipid as *European Gigolo*'s, no actor could thrive. Recounting the plot would be a waste of ink, and at 75 minutes, the movie feels crushingly

overlong, which is bound to happen when a film is repeating one joke repeatedly for its entire running length. (Deuce Bigalo is a *man-whore*. Laughing yet?) The camera stares pitilessly at the performers while they make faces and deliver fifth-rate punchlines, and the whole movie looks like it was lit and shot in someone's basement. (The film's director, ironically enough, is credited as one Mike Bigelow. What, was Alan Smithee unavailable?)

The film is hopelessly terrible, but whatever … you could say the same about lots of gross-out comedies, *especially* when Schneider (or Sandler) is involved.

European Gigolo, however, is something special. This movie might actually be *about* something.

Remember, in *Annie Hall*, when the subject of penis envy was brought up and Alvy said, "I'm one of the few *males* who suffers from that"? *European Gigolo* suggests that Alvy might have an ally in Rob Schneider.

I have never seen a Hollywood movie as obsessed with the male member as this one. More than three major, sequence-capping gags end with either Deuce or his pimp, T.J. (Eddie Griffin), being caught in too-close proximity with another man's junk, and throughout the film, Deuce finds himself hounded by the enormous endowments of everyone around him. Scene after scene, characters are introduced whose only function is to make Deuce feel sexually inadequate, and Deuce can't help himself – he *stares* at the bulges in their pants.

Everywhere he goes, in fact, Deuce and the audience are surrounded: T.J. bookends his rants of "I'm not gay!" by describing the "big, juicy" attributes of his employees, thong-clad male strippers shake their wares, and the European client with whom Deuce shares the most rapport has a penis for a *nose*. (Yes, it grows when she's excited.) The theme of the movie is made explicit when, during the climactic confrontation with the film's nominal villain (Jeroen Krabbe), Deuce has his revelation, saying – actually *saying* – that Size Doesn't Matter; what women want isn't in your pants, it's in your heart, and Deuce's fellow man-whores, shamed at last, remove the food items they have stuffed down their trousers.

This might be the first movie ever to use penile panic as its subject matter. And there are certainly the seeds of a comic idea here, but it's quite obvious that no one involved recognized them. The gags seem to be there because … well, because dick jokes can be funny, but what we have in *European Gigolo* aren't *jokes*. They're *references*. To Schneider, his co-screenwriters, the producers, and "Mike Bigelow," a big dick is hilarious just because it *is*. And that's a small-dick mentality. (Talk about over-compensation – some men use a sock, Schneider makes a *movie*.)

I left the theatre feeling that I just spent 75 minutes watching Schneider work out his sexual hang-ups – in a *Deuce Bigalow* flick, no less! – and there's nothing inherently wrong with that; in the '60s and '70s, Woody Allen made quite a nice career out of it. But the film's juvenile sensibility doesn't mesh with the implications of the story, almost as if the filmmakers didn't want to own up to what they were actually *doing* here. It might not be worth anything as an entertainment, but *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo* could, for psychology grad students, be the subject of a hell of an interesting thesis paper.

THE WILD PARROTS OF TELEGRAPH HILL

Like *March of the Penguins, The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, now playing at the Brew & View, provides breathtaking images of birds being birds. But in Judy Irving's marvelous documentary, these creatures are in a rather *un*natural habitat – a neighborhood in San Francisco, where Mark Bittner, a middle-aged man with no job and no source of regular income, cared for dozens of the wild parrots that populated this California borough.

What Irving has created in *Wild Parrots* is both an exquisite nature documentary and an

insightful look at a man’s growing *understanding* of nature; the film, like Errol Morris’s *Gates of Heaven*, cannily examines the bonds that can form between man and beast. Bittner is remarkably candid about acknowledging that the parrots’ affection is based on the food he provides; if the food were gone, he admits, they’d be gone. (They do seem enormously fond of him, though.) But Bittner’s adoration for these creatures is palpable – he gave them names, recognized their personalities, and even tried playing matchmaker between them – and the effect on his life profound. Irving captures this saga with beautiful subtlety, and a sensitivity that never turns maudlin. Bittner is an eccentric, perhaps, but good-natured, clear-headed, and deeply human, much like this wonderfully enjoyable movie itself.

THE SKELETON KEY

Is it an example of a Northern bias in the press that Southern-gothic horror flicks are invariably labeled by critics as “ludicrous”? I mean, I generally think they are, too, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be *fun. The Skeleton Key*, for example, is as hokey and spottily plotted as any in its genre. But after about a half-hour, the movie starts to become giddily, goofily entertaining. Director Iain Softley sustains the atmosphere of creepy decay, and, in a rare shock, the movie’s finale turns out to be surprising while still playing *fair*; I had a pretty great time on the car ride home working out the convolutions of the story. Kate Hudson’s wide, gamin eyes are perfectly suited for horror-flick popping, and Peter Sarsgaard, with his insinuating purr of a voice, John Hurt (talk about acting with your *eyes*), and Gena Rowlands perform wonders with intentionally sketchy characters; no one on-screen is playing the material as more than the trashy nonsense it is, nor should they. *The Skeleton Key* might be rife with horror-flick clichés – Kate backs into things that startle her, engages in a lot of “Hello?!”s in the dark, that sort of thing – but the relish with which the movie *celebrates* its clichés gives it a kick.