

Written by Mike Schulz

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## ***PROOF***

Most cinephiles detest filmed versions of plays, with their awkward exposition, stagy dialogue, and functional, assembly-line characters who serve their purpose within the author's conceit and exit just in time for another character to show up and do the same; oftentimes, you can all but see the proscenium arch hovering overhead.

Due to my natural adoration of actors, I generally *like* filmed versions of plays – I'll gladly sacrifice filmmaking savvy for the chance to watch great performers tear into meaty roles – but even I will admit that *Proof* sometimes tested my tolerance. John Madden's adaptation of David Auburn's Pulitzer Prize and Tony winner, which concerns Catherine (Gwyneth Paltrow), a young woman who may have inherited the madness of her deceased, math-professor father Robert (Anthony Hopkins), is pretty stiff. The characters here don't talk, they

*declare*

, and the pieces of the story's puzzle fall far too neatly into place. Nothing has been done to give

*Proof*

the

*rhythm*

of a film; every scene has the same tone as the one preceding it, and figures who may have seemed sharply drawn in the theatre are one-note caricatures here; despite their natural charm,

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Hope Davis and Jake Gyllenhaal, who fill out

*Proof*

's acting quartet, appear hopelessly stage-bound.

Madden's film version would be completely forgettable if not for the contributions of Paltrow and Hopkins, who give *Proof* its only hints of soul. In a few sequences, Paltrow reaches such devastating levels of grief that the actress seems revelatory, and although he's only seen in flashbacks and visions, Hopkins feels like the most flesh-and-blood being on-screen; his joviality and frustration are palpably felt, and the heartbreaking familial scenes between him and Paltrow are completely engrossing. As a film experience, *Proof* isn't much, your standard "opening up" of material that probably should have remained on the stage. But if this is, indeed, our one chance to see Paltrow and Hopkins play Catherine and Robert together, it's a more than worthwhile cause; you can be bummed by the film itself and still agree that these two are deserving of a standing ovation.



### **IN HER SHOES**

Like stage dialogue, sitcom dialogue in movies is something you can just *feel*; the characters may say funny, clever things, but the words don't sound like anything human beings would actually utter – you keep waiting for their sentences to be accompanied by a laugh track.

*In Her Shoes*

details the loving, frustrating relationship between two sisters – dumb, glam party girl Maggie (Cameron Diaz) and smart, schlubby lawyer Rose (Toni Collette) – and although the actresses form a feisty, appealing bond, you don't buy it for a minute; everything they say is too witty and pointed by half, and matters are made worse when Maggie visits the siblings' grandmother (Shirley MacLaine) in her Florida retirement home, where everyone speaks and acts as if auditioning for the big-screen adaptation of

*The Golden Girls*

. All of the expected chick-flick staples are accounted for here, and although they're more enjoyable than usual – Mark Feuerstein is wonderful as the token love interest whose only crime is being perfect – Curtis Hanson can't do anything to make the material *convincing*

; even with the hand-held camerawork and sharp editing giving the film a refreshingly

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rough-edged look,

*In Her Shoes*

plays as phony. What, exactly, is the director of

*L.A. Confidential*

and

*8 Mile* doing

here? Is it possible that Curtis Hanson took on the challenge of

*In Her Shoes*

merely to spend the weeks of filmmaking watching Diaz do her Cameron Diaz thing, i.e., smiling mischievously while wearing as little clothing as possible? If so, it would be hard to blame him – Diaz looks absolutely spectacular. But watching as the camera unapologetically salivates over her bare midriff and fixates on her ass is as close to honesty as this film gets.



### ***THE GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED***

*The Greatest Game Ever Played*, which tells of a young American caddy, Francis Ouimet (Shia LaBeouf), who competed in the 1913 U.S. Open, is a Disney entertainment-slash-history-lesson geared toward kids, so I guess we need to cut it some slack. Every hoary cliché in this feel-good, triumph-of-the-underdog flick is represented. Pissed off immigrant father (Elias Koteas) demanding that his son stick with his own kind? Check. Half-hearted romance between Francis and a rich girl who's out of his league? Check. Scenes of uptight Brits positively *aghast*

that this little upstart is golfing with the stuffed shirts? Check. (It's been a while since I've seen a movie where the

*English*

are the meanest sons of bitches on earth.) Bill Paxton directs with stodgy earnestness – oftentimes, with our hero moping about and peering dejectedly out of windows, the film resembles

*Hamlet on the Links*

– but the movie is sincere, and even if you don't believe much of

*The Greatest Game ...*

(the U.S. Open scenes, with their

*faux*

video-game effects, are indistinguishable from a golf match on PlayStation 2), it's bearable enough, and Shia LaBeouf is a natural charmer.

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And then, shortly after the film's halfway point, a new element is introduced, one so repellent that I had no problem laughing out loud at the remainder of the film. That element is named Eddie, who appears to be about 10 years old, comes to caddy for Francis through his U.S. Open matches, and is played by a young actor named Josh Flitter with such revolting, self-infatuated cutesiness that I spent nearly an hour of the film praying that an errant golf ball would smack this little wiener in the noggin, knocking him out cold. Usually, I feel uncomfortable dissing the performance abilities of kids, but Flitter barely qualifies as one. Delivering his lines like a diminutive Shecky Greene, and grinning and crying and dispensing pearls of golf wisdom with nauseating, *aren't-I-adorable?* gumption, Flitter is a noxious pain, yet the movie seems to think that not only is he adorable, but that we in the audience

*care*

about him;

*The Greatest Game Ever Played*

ends with a title card informing us that Eddie, who remained lifelong friends with Francis, went on to become a multi-millionaire. With Flitter in the role, this seemed solid proof of the non-existence of God.



### ***WALLACE & GROMIT: THE CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT***

Wow. Not much space left. Let's get right to it, then: *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* is the funniest movie in current release, the smartest movie in current release, and, scene for scene, moment for moment, the most astonishingly well-produced movie in current release, the kind of brilliant, madcap comedy you not only want to own on DVD as quickly as possible, but to have committed to *memory*. Creator Nick Park, co-directing here with Steve Box, has expanded the world of his clay-rific short-film characters with staggering dexterity; the movie – a beautifully-structured *homage* to horror conventions – is a 100-minute onslaught of verbal and visual imagination, and so insanely funny that you might find yourself wishing the hilarity *would* stop, just so you could catch your breath. Bring on the sequels. As quickly as possible.