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THE PRODUCERS

Devotees of the theatre had plenty of reason to be excited about *The Producers*, the movie version of Mel Brooks' stage work based on his 1968 movie. (Got that?) This tale of two Broadway crooks who plan to make a fortune on the worst musical ever conceived has been brought to the screen by the Broadway production's director/choreographer, Susan Stroman, with all of Brooks' musical-comedy numbers intact, and the show's original stars, Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick, reprise their roles as Bialystock and Bloom. It's enough to make a theatre fan nearly giddy with anticipation.Yet after more than two hours spent with this theatrical adaptation, I wanted nothing more than to get my ass to a *movie*.

Judged by the evidence here, Stroman appears to be a genius choreographer without a lick of film sense. *The Producers* is rhythmless and visually static – the material hasn't been re-thought for the screen at all – and her direction of the musical numbers suggests that she merely plopped the cameras down in front of her actors and yelled, "Go!" (I've seen videotaped high-school productions that displayed a keener understanding of how to film a musical.) The movie, simultaneously frenetic and exhausted, limps from one set piece to another with almost no variance in tone – Stroman might be the one comic director more obvious than Mel Brooks himself – and it runs on for at least a half-hour too long; *The Producers* makes you understand why plays have *intermissions.*

Under Stroman's guidance, this *Producers* reeks of panic; you can see the fear in the performers' eyes, as if they're implicitly asking the director, "Are we getting *away* with this?" They're not. Lane and Broderick don't appear to have tempered down their wildly theatrical stage mannerisms one iota. Both earn several laughs – Broderick's readings, especially, are often inspired – but they spend so much time mugging and shrieking at top volume that their performances become oppressive; you feel like ducking under your seat every time they launch into one of their manic routines. (Two other holdovers from the Broadway cast – Gary Beach and Roger Bart – are a lot more fun as a pair of *uber*

-swishy stage vets, but only because their lack of subtlety takes up less screen time.)

As the playwright with the Nazi fixation, Will Ferrell falls back on his tired, Will Ferrell-y shtick – attempting to create a comic style out of vaguely blasé hostility – and poor Uma Thurman looks almost painfully uncomfortable, like a hard-working, miscast trouper playing to an empty house. (And not to be rude, but with her solid, statuesque physique, Thurman can't remotely pull off the light, frisky moves Stroman has choreographed for her.) *The Producers* provides an occasional laugh – admittedly, the occasional big laugh – but, perhaps especially for its core audience, it's still an enormous disappointment; I'm a huge theatre fan, yet after the disheartening one-two punch of *Rent* and *The Producers* on cineplex screens, I'm feeling less comfortable about *admitting* it.

FUN WITH DICK & JANE

And the award for the most inaccurately titled movie of 2005 goes to *Fun with Dick & Jane*, Dean Parisot's tepid remake of the tepid 1977 comedy involving two rich suburbanites who lose it all and turn to bank robbery to ease their financial woes. In general, there are few sights more depressing than watching movie stars attempt to slog through material that's clearly beneath them, and slogging is all we see Jim Carrey and Tea Leoni do here – Carrey performs a desperate rehash of his Truman Burbank, Leoni appears distracted, as if she's still hunting for her character, and usually reliable actors such as Alec Baldwin and Richard Jenkins have nothing funny to do. (Or perhaps they *did* and those moments were left on the cutting-room floor; the haphazard editing seems to terminate sequences five beats before they land on their punchlines). *Fun with Dick & Jane* ? Nope. Not so much.

RUMOR HAS IT

I can handle improbable romantic comedies and I can even deal with downright *stupid* romantic comedies, but I simply cannot abide a
boring
romantic comedy. Welcome, folks, to Rob Reiner's
Rumor Has It
, which takes a rather clever conceit – a young woman (Jennifer Aniston) discovers that her birth parents might have been the models for Dustin Hoffman's and Katherine Ross' characters in
The Graduate
– and turns it into something maudlin, predictable, unromantic, unfunny, and achingly dull. Aniston does her umpteenth variation on Rachel Green – I adored her on
Friends
, but if Aniston wants to be a bona fide movie star, she needs a new bag of tricks
pronto
– and after a charming return to comic inspiration in
The Upside of Anger
, Kevin Costner is back in just-staying-awake-'til-I-cash-my-check mode; he's like the physical embodiment of
beige
. Matters are helped somewhat by the ever-endearing Mark Ruffalo and a refreshingly salty Shirley MacLaine, but
Rumor Has It
is a chore to sit through, worthwhile only if you're looking for a dark place in which to take a 100-minute nap.

THE RINGER

In *The Ringer*, Johnny Knoxville plays a sweet dufus recruited to fix the Special Olympics by posing as mentally challenged. Through the course of the film, he meets a nice girl, realizes the error of his ways, and eventually realizes that the mentally challenged are Just Like You and Me, and I'm happy to say that I saw this well-meaning slob comedy under optimum conditions for a Farrelly-brothers-produced endeavor: at Rock Island's Rocket Theatre with a friend, a pizza, and a bucket of beer.

How was it?

The pizza and beer were *awesome*.

MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA

Based on the (apparently) beloved best-seller by Arthur Golden, Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha* has been so delicately, pristinely designed that you could eat off its images, which would certainly be preferable than having to *watch* them. Like a Jane Austen adaptation with all the taste and humor drained dry, *Memoirs* is a ludicrous series of Asian tableaux masquerading as drama, only enjoyable for the jokes you're making about it. (The bitchy cat-fighting between Ziyi Zhang and Gong Li made the movie resemble *All Obi Eve*, and on more than one occasion, when the filmmakers were instructing us yet again on the timeless mystique of these fancy Japanese hookers, I found myself tempted to shout, "You

go
, geisha!") Yet I think it's best to let the film speak for itself. Here are a few of my favorite quotables in Robin Swicord's floridly melodramatic script: "Do you think a geisha is fit to love?
Never
!" "My life had turned into a game, and only
she
knew the rules." "Who wants a plum when someone has already had a bite?" "Now, I make a small but tidy living renting rooms." "I shall
destroy
you!" And my personal fave: "Agony and beauty, for us, live side by side." After 140 minutes of
Memoirs of a Geisha
, I know
exactly
how that feels.