

The "Road" Always Traveled: "Glory Road," "Hostel," and "Casanova"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 17 January 2006 18:00

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GLORY ROAD

Is it just a coincidence, or do you think there's an annual meeting wherein Disney shareholders tell the studio's executives, "Bring us this year's feel-good, triumph-of-the-underdog sports flick, and if you can find one that's more formulaic, clichéd, and shameless than *last* year's, all the better!" A couple of years back, we endured Kurt Russell guiding a bunch of interchangeable skaters to Olympic victory in the hockey drama

Miracle

, and my head is still reeling from the moribund sentimentality – and beyond-obnoxious miniature caddie – of

The Greatest Game Ever Played

, which managed to make golf look about five times

less

exciting than the sport's reputation would suggest.

This year – well, this *month*, at any rate – it's basketball's turn to get Disneyfied. *Glory Road* tells of the 1966 NCAA basketball-championship victory of the Texas Western Miners, whose all-black starting lineup scored an unexpected victory against the favored, all-white players of the University of Kentucky; in the film, the Miners and their coach, Don Haskins (Josh Lucas), have to face not only the formidable championship race, but the prejudice and bigotry of others in their community, on the road, and on their very team. Director James Gartner's work is well-meaning and, for what I'm guessing is its intended, youthful audience, probably inspiring.

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Of course it is. But is *Glory Road* any good?

It certainly *thinks* so. The movie's noble intentions are spelled out before *Glory Road* even begins, when a title card pops on-screen that reads, "Based on the true story," which we *expect* to see, but which is immediately followed by another card that completes the sentence – "of the team that changed *everything*" (italics mine). Usually, such self-regarding hyperbole would be left to the film's advertising campaign, but in *Glory Road*, it feels absolutely appropriate – the movie certainly *feels* like a 100-minute advertisement, for Respecting Your Teammates and Embracing Our Differences and Following Your Dream and any other generic, life-affirming message to be found in its pedestrian screenplay.

And that's a shame, because the story behind the Miners' victory *is* inspiring, and in *Glory Road*, it even leads, occasionally, to some edgy moments; the film's most effective sequence is probably its most subtle one, when the Miners, one by one, are introduced at one of their first games, and while the white players receive a healthy ovation from the crowd, the black players jog on to the court in almost total silence. Every so often, *Glory Road* details the fear and hatred the African-American Miners had to endure in ways that feel fresh, but those times are rare, and the hopelessly routine arc of the film's script dulls the movie of rooting interest beyond its weighty themes. (When critics complain about works of this type being "predictable," they're not saying that because the good guys inevitably triumph in the end, but because the *path* to that triumph is so unsurprising.)

Most depressingly, though, the racism that the Miners experience turns out to be nothing that can't be undone through a series of wins on the basketball court. The subject of race in America is so incomparably large that when it's dealt with as blithely as it is in most of *Glory Road*, you almost wish it weren't addressed at all, and *Glory Road* compounds the problem by having its characters orate when they should speak, sometimes in ways that make the movie's dialogue seem senseless. When one of the African-American

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Miners declaims, regarding the white bigots the team is confronting, "They're takin' away our dignity!" Coach Haskins responds with, "Nobody can take away somethin' you don't

give

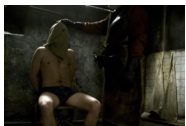
him." A stirring line, in theory, but actually, they

can

– it's called

stealing

.



HOSTEL

When did horror movies stop being *fun*? In the recent past, when I'd tell friends what scare flick I'd just returned from seeing, their eyes would light up and they'd ask, "How was it?" with genuine excitement and anticipation – who

a good fright at the cineplex? Now, though, the mood seems to have changed. When I tell people I recently saw director Eli Roth's

Hostel

, my friends suck in their breath, squint their eyes, and ask, "Really? How

is

it?" with hesitancy and a look of preemptive disgust – they want to know if the film is

scary

-scary or merely repellent. Their wariness is understandable. This horror yarn concerns a trio of tourists – two Americans and one from Iceland – who, enticed by the promise of mind-blowing sex and drugs, take to trip to eastern Europe's Slovakia and wind up imprisoned in a neo-gothic torture chamber, and although it's effectively staged and executed, the scares come solely through the sight of people suffering in unimaginable ways. In movies of this ilk, as in the

Saw

films, conventional horror staples have given way to no staples whatsoever; there's nothing happening onscreen

except

mutilation, which would be offensive if

Hostel

's lack of variety didn't make the film so dull. With the majority of modern horror films, genuine scares have been replaced by mere disgust, and fans of the genre deserve better than the latest big-screen version of

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Fear Factor

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CASANOVA

I have no idea what the hell is going on in Lasse Hallstrom's *Casanova*, but I'm not sure it matters all that much; the movie is such a goofy, free-wheeling, ridiculously overstuffed costume entertainment that you can have a terrific time at the film even though you won't necessarily buy a minute of it. Heath Ledger plays the titular, 18th Century seducer, and the plot finds him, against his better judgment, falling in love with a feisty feminist (Sienna Miller) while "the lard king of Genoa" (Oliver Platt) threatens to marry his beloved. Meanwhile, tightly corseted nymphettes salivate in Casanova's presence, a stern bishop (the comically imperious Jeremy Irons) looks to execute him for "heresy and fornication," and all manner of mistaken identity and romantic entanglements ensue –

Casanova

is like

Amadeus

meets

Shakespeare in Love

on helium. Vacillating between verbal wordplay and in-your-face physical shtick, the film's comedic tone is impossible to gauge – oftentimes you're not sure whether you're meant to laugh at or weep for the characters – and Hallstrom doesn't appear to have much knack for the staging of slapstick farce; the material begs for a more knockabout vision than the director's typically contemplative style allows. Yet

Casanova

sails along through sheer boisterousness and the beauty of its design, and it's bettered considerably by Heath Ledger, who swallows his jokes with such amusing, underplayed skill that you laugh at his more hysterical readings about three beats after the fact. With his deep, suggestive baritone making every line Casanova utters sound like the world's dirtiest come-on, Ledger is a graceful, inventive comedian here, and when he's partnered with Platt or Irons or the radiant Miller, the performers' jolliness makes up for nearly all quibbles with the presentation; it's quite possible that the actors in

Casanova

realize they're in crap, yet if they do, they're doing a great job of keeping that information a

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secret.