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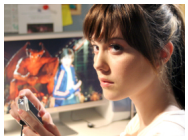

FINAL DESTINATION 3

Final Destination 3 is, almost unequivocally, the least successful of the franchise's entries. But you know what? The movie is *still* pretty terrific. It's easy to resent sequels that's don't deviate at all from the proven formula of their forebears, especially in regards to horror flicks; audiences want these follow-ups to give them what they loved about the original but not *merely* what they loved about the original. (The most common complaint I hear about horror sequels is "It's just like the first one.")

Yet that axiom doesn't really apply to the *Final Destination* movies. The thrill of this series – 2003's *Final Destination 2* especially – has nothing to do with inventive plotting and *everything* to do with the wit and ingenuity behind the *familiar* plotting; we go to the *Final Destination* s to see just how comically *outré* the filmmakers can make their characters' predestined deaths, and the more gruesome and ridiculous, the better. In general, the lead-ups to the executions in the *Final Destination* films are so hysterically convoluted – for horror fans, they have a glorious, comic inevitability – that, without drastically altering the formula one iota, the sequels seem to have *built-in* originality. (You would enjoy the preludes to the killings more than the killings themselves if those deaths weren't so satisfyingly repellent.) In its own, admittedly lesser, way, the *Final Destination* series is as compulsively watchable as the Indiana Jones series; we know the generic, interchangeable kids here are going to perish, just as we know that, no matter how dire his circumstances, Indy will dust off his fedora and *escape* death. The kick isn't seeing what'll happen; it's seeing *how* it'll happen.

Our enjoyment is aided, of course, by the *Final Destination*s being more thoughtful, and a good deal smarter, than most works in their genre; the movies' world view might be fatalistic, but at least they *have* a view. (They even come dangerously close to having a *theology*.) In *Final Destination 3*, seven high schoolers narrowly avoid death after one of their number, the haunted-looking Wendy (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), foresees their demise in a horrific roller-coaster catastrophe – they get off the ride before the coaster's cars begin their ascent – and after the tragic accident does, indeed, occur, the kids are marked: They've cheated death, and Death wants payback. As in the previous *FD* films, what gives this third endeavor heft is the lead characters' *awareness* of their plight – Wendy quickly recognizes who, among them, is next on the Grim Reaper's hit list – and what gives the movie *comic* heft is that her attempts to stop the killings have no effect whatsoever; if anything, Wendy's involvement only makes the eventual, "accidental" executions *more* nightmarishly funny. In a sickeningly subversive way, *Final Destination 3*, like its predecessors, is rather deep; it tells us that, despite our best intentions, death will *always* find us, so when the inevitable occurs, we might as well laugh.

Granted, this won't be everyone's idea of fun, and *Final Destination 3* does cross the boundaries of taste when a pair of nude girls gets fried in their tanning beds; with their (intentionally, I hope) obnoxious Valley Girl phrasing and sub-*Mean Girls* bitchiness, you certainly *want* to see these two get offed, but the lewdness, claustrophobia, and searing pain of the scene ruin your enjoyment of it. Yet the other slayings, I thought, were a *great* time; I particularly liked the Goth Girl's undoing via an errant nail-gun – among many such sequences in the film, this one has a juicy, protracted setup, like the cinematic equivalent of the board game Mouse Trap – and felt something akin to catharsis when a heavy object fell on a particularly odious character and he was eliminated with a more-than-satisfying *splat*. (I'm all for more evil characters going *splat* in movies; this guy's death was a

de facto
reprise of the elimination of "Susan Sarandon" in
Team America: World Police
and, if possible, even funnier.)

Though *Final Destination 3* is saddled with clunky dialogue and – the sincere, touching Winstead excepted – even clunkier performers, the movie is shrewdly staged by James Wong and is filled with sly touches; this is the first film I've seen to truly suggest
why
some people have a paralyzing fear of roller coasters. And though you might find yourself wishing that the preambles to the murders were even
more
elaborately structured than they are – I was secretly hoping for better payoff from the spilled suntan lotion and unfortunately placed chewing gum – they're effective enough;
Final Destination 3
never quite reaches the levels of inspiration and hilarity of
FD1
and
2
, but for a third go-around, it's remarkably solid. Only one element of the movie strikes me as a hideous blunder, and that's when, for a mercifully brief moment, the convolutions of the plotting were photographically linked to the collapse of the Twin Towers, as if the happenings of 9/11 proved the
Final Destination
films' Death Will Find You thesis. It's a queasy, ill-conceived moment, and you don't know what to make of it; considering how much blood is shed in the film, certainly attacking this sequence with a pair of scissors wouldn't have been out of line.

WHEN A STRANGER CALLS

For nearly its entire running length, there is nothing going on in *When a Stranger Calls*. Literally
nothing
. A fresh-faced teen is hired to babysit two youngsters, and while the tots doze, she receives a

series of threatening phone calls that begin to frazzle her nerves – she paces the house, turns the light switches on and off, occasionally gets freaked by the family cat, and all the while, her damned cell phone won't stop ringing; we're being continually primed for something bad to happen, yet nothing freaking
happens
. (This isn't the building of suspense. This is
dawdling
.) By the time the psycho with the re-dial button finally shows up, you feel like shouting "Thank God!", or at least you would if the climactic scenes were in any way more gripping, or made any more sense, than the excruciatingly dull ones that preceded it. Void of any semblance of thrills, this terrible remake of the terrible 1979 original is an affront to logic, structure, and even the basic desire for a good, scary time. Are the young audiences lining up for this unaware of how they're being insulted, or do they just not care? The answer to that may be more frightening than anything you'll experience in
When a Stranger Calls.

THE PINK PANTHER

Ignoring all discussion about whether Steve Martin's Inspector Clouseau holds a candle to Peter Sellers' (he doesn't) or whether director Shawn Levy displays the knack for knockabout slapstick demonstrated by Blake Edwards (he doesn't, either), let's just take a moment to acknowledge the fact that an American comic adopting an exaggerated French accent *is* funny. For about five seconds. And in
The Pink Panther
, after those first five seconds passed, I felt every single one of the next 5,395.