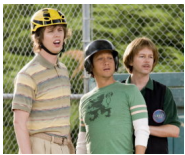


Take Me Out of the Ball Game: "The Benchwarmers," "Take the Lead," and "ATL"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 11 April 2006 18:00

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THE BENCHWARMERS

The audience laughter at *The Benchwarmers* chilled me to the marrow. What in God's name are we allowing to pass for "children's entertainment" these days? Dennis Dugan's "comedy" is about a trio of aging dweebs (Rob Schneider, David Spade, and Jon Heder) who – seeking retribution for their childhood humiliations – arrange to play in a Little League tournament, and it's better for everyone's mental health that I ignore the logistics of the plotting. Suffice it to say that the film is an empowerment fantasy for middle-aged booger-eaters everywhere. But it isn't geared toward adults. (At least, not adults with IQs in the triple digits.)

The Benchwarmers

is a diversion aimed squarely at kids, and as such, it's almost unspeakably repellent – the movie is so hateful that you want to file a restraining order against it.

Yet, astonishingly, *The Benchwarmers* seems to be doing its job; the large, youthful audience I saw the film with howled with glee from opening credits to close. And that scares the crap out of me.

Much of what makes the movie horrific will, understandably, fly over the heads of the children

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who see it. They won't recognize that the movie, co-produced by Adam Sandler, follows the blueprint of Sandler's loathsome formula movies to an odious T – our heroes are allowed to do and say any hostile, nauseating thing they want and the movie will continue to consider them "lovable." They won't notice that David Spade continues to make a comic style out of sheer *laziness*, and that the product placement is so egregious that it makes you want to cower. (I'm not sure I want to frequent Pizza Hut ever again.) They won't understand how depressing it is to see Reggie Jackson – not Reggie! – debase himself in the requisite sports-legend cameo. And they may not even be bothered by the film's staggering lack of continuity, as if director Dugan forgot to yell "Action!" until his actors were halfway through a scene.

But shouldn't *The Benchwarmers'* youthful fan base realize that the sounds of flatulence *don't* get more hysterical with endless repetition? That there's nothing inherently funny in getting puked on? That establishing a character as gay isn't, in itself, a source of hilarity? That the genital trauma masquerading as comedy is tiresome to the point of absurdity? (In a classic *Simpsons* episode, Homer explains the timeless appeal of a movie wherein a guy gets hit in the nuts with a football: "The ball! His groin! It works on so many levels!" Homer would *love The Benchwarmers* .)

Is there any point to getting in a dither about this movie? Maybe not. In theory, *The Benchwarmers* is just another harmless slob comedy with no goal other than to entertain. But I'm not convinced that it's harmless. Movies of this sort are insidious. They're gradually, almost imperceptively, lowering our collective standards, so that young audiences are not only going to stop expecting cleverness and coherence in a comedy – they're going to *resent* cleverness and coherence, and screenwriters will follow suit. Why bother crafting a comedy of any wit or substance when a few fart jokes and some projectile vomiting will leave 'em laughing just as easily? (*The Benchwarmers* is a stand-up-to-the-bullies flick that has been designed *for* the bullies.) The young audiences roaring at this film are going to grow up to be the older audiences roaring at *Larry the Cable Guy: Health Inspector*, and the thought of that doesn't just make me want to quit movie reviewing; it makes me want to quit *movies* .



TAKE THE LEAD

Antonio Banderas is so suave it's comical, and thankfully, he knows it. In Liz Friedlander's *Take the Lead*

, Banderas plays real-life ballroom-dance instructor Pierre Dulaine, who helped inspire the New York program immortalized in last year's

Mad Hot Ballroom

. Dulaine, as presented here, takes it upon himself to lead a high-school detention class to dance glory, and when Banderas gets the chance to show off his lithe, graceful physique or killer smile, his charisma is intoxicating. As an actor, Banderas loves turning the audience on – his Che in

Evita

is all the sexier for being

aware

of his sexiness – and when the movie allows him to, Banderas emerges in

Take the Lead

as a sort of maskless Zorro, a natural charmer with a sneaky, cat-who-ate-the-canary grin. He's tremendous fun to watch – you're hard-pressed to

stop

smiling during his scenes.

Too bad the film doesn't put him to better use. But *Take the Lead's* script turns the film into a retread of every inspirational-teacher drama you've ever seen, right down to the initially stern, eventually accepting principal (a mostly wasted Alfre Woodard) – the movie trots out clichés you'd almost *forgotten* about –

and while the students are entertaining (especially the gifted, naturalistic Yaya DaCosta), the hoary subplots they find themselves in are not. Every once in a while, screenwriter Dianne Houston will give a familiar line a fresh spin, but we've been through these paces too many times before.

Is the dancing impressive at least? I could barely tell. It's ironic that a movie about dancing

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wouldn't flow, but the choppy editing destroys the rhythm of the musical sequences; we barely get the chance to see a routine performed for more than three seconds straight, and they're not exactly convincing routines to begin with. (This is one of those movies where the dancers "spontaneously" break into an impromptu number that looks choreographed within an inch of its life.) It turns out, in *Take the Lead*, that Banderas' youthful charges aren't the problem. It's the *movie* that seems unwilling to dance.



ATL

Aside from its story arc, nothing about *ATL* is expected. You keep thinking that you know where it's going, and you're continually surprised, not by the freshness of the material, but by the ease and honesty with which it's presented. Set amongst a group of lifelong friends in inner-city Atlanta, *ATL* is like a less incendiary *Boyz N the Hood* – it's

actually more reminiscent of *The Brothers* or even *Breaking Away*

– and director Chris Robinson stages the coming-of-age drama with warmth and casual truth. The relaxed camaraderie between the film's friends and family members feels just right, and the tensions feel just right, too – Mykelti Williamson has some wonderfully affecting moments as the dyspeptic uncle of two of the boys (and he's funny besides). And Robinson, working from a surprisingly sharp script by Tina Gordon Chism, peppers the film with delightful touches.

(Seeing the dialogue of a comically incomprehensible character *subtitled*

is a particularly inspired moment, and when Robinson wants to show how little a teacher's reprimands mean to the student *being*

reprimanded, he does it with beautiful comic shorthand – to the kid's ears, the teacher's ramblings echo the "wah-wah-*wah*

-wah" noises of an authority figure from Charlie Brown cartoons.)

ATL

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is smart, and funny, and remarkably devoid of melodrama; it's the rare movie that actually gets better and better the longer you dwell on it.