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



## THANK YOU FOR SMOKING

Jason Reitman's *Thank You for Smoking*, adapted from Christopher Buckley's satiric novel, doesn't have much visual flair, but one recurring image in the film lends it worlds of variety: Aaron Eckhart's smile.

Eckhart plays hotshot tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor, and to say that Naylor enjoys his work would be a ridiculous understatement. He *adores* it – the political spin, the fabrications, and the knowledge that, by successfully representing those whose business is to create new generations of nicotine addicts, he, too, is getting away with murder.

Naylor smiles all during *Thank You for Smoking*, and amazingly, that smile never seems exactly the same in any two scenes. Often, it reveals the deep satisfaction of a man in love with his career. It sometimes exudes a guileless, kid-in-a-candy-store glee, as when Naylor is wowed by the luxuries afforded a man in his profession. (When he takes a business trip in a swanky private jet, Naylor all but bounces in his seat.) Occasionally, it will seem sincere but frozen stiff, as it is during Naylor's first rendezvous with an intimidating, mint-julep-swilling tobacco CEO (Robert Duvall, oozing desiccated contentment). And behind all of them is what can only be read as the private smile of Aaron Eckhart himself, who, for the first time since 1997's *In the Company of Men* 

, has found a role that deserves the actor's formidable, continually underrated talents.

Part of what's wonderful about *Thank You for Smoking* is that our helplessly likable protagonist only experiences a slight crisis of conscience; the movie isn't all that interested in making Naylor "a better person," which allows Eckhart to give a glorious, robust comic performance. Naylor is an unusually intriguing figure – a narcissist and practiced liar, but a self-deprecating and even sweet one – and as the film follows him through a particularly vexing series of events, Eckhart is masterful, seducing those around him, and the audience, with Naylor's charm and brio. You know those guys who are complete jerks yet still seem to continually score the most money and the highest praise and the best women? That's Aaron Eckhart's Naylor. People of this sort are often hell to be around, but it's amazing how much fun they can be on screen

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Thank You for Smoking is terrifically nonjudgmental. Or rather, it judges everybody equally (the lobbyists, the legislators, the Hollywood elite, the media), and in doing so gives juicy comedic roles to a bevy of sterling performers. As the fellow members of Naylor's M.O.D. (Merchants of Death) Squad – lobbyists for the promoters of alcohol and firearms – Maria Bello and David Koechner are hysterically put-upon; the news of a birth-defect lawsuit strikes Bello's spin doctor as a

major

pain in the ass. (The M.O.D. Squad enjoys viciously funny arguments over whose area of expertise results in the most annual fatalities.) William H. Macy plays a fastidious senator with perfectly elocuted contempt, and J.K. Simmons is a howl as Naylor's gruff boss; he's like Simmons' dyspeptic J. Jonah Jameson from

Spider-Man

with an arsenal of F-bombs. As Naylor's son, Cameron Bright, whose expressionless stare is often used to freak audiences out, finally uses his deadpan for comic effect – it's a welcome change. Sam Elliott delivers a potent cameo as an ailing, former Marlboro Man. Rob Lowe is hilarious as a quick-thinking, smooth-talking agent with a fondness for geisha smocks. (Those *West Wing* 

years paid off spectacularly – Lowe has become a masterfully polished comedian.) And, for a few brief minutes, Adam Brody steals the film as Lowe's hyper-alert assistant; Brody, with his exquisite, stream-of-consciousness gabbiness, creates a completely unique comic figure. (With well-meaning condescension, this metrosexual dufus asks Naylor's son, "Can I get you an orange juice or a coffee or a Red Bull?") For the character turns alone,

Thank You for Smoking

would stand as a sensational entertainment; I couldn't venture a guess as to the last major film with this many memorable, wildly entertaining supporting turns. (Only Katie Holmes, as an ambitiously slutty reporter, feels a bit lightweight, but that's mostly the fault of an underwritten role, and she's certainly not

bad

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For a first-time writer/director, Reitman maintains a remarkably consistent satiric tone, and he pulls off effects so subtle they can barely be *called* effects – it wasn't until *Smoking*'s final scenes that I realized we never saw anyone actually smoke during the entire *film* 

. And Reitman's script, filled with more than two dozen laugh-out-loud moments, features some lines that make you roar and wince simultaneously, as when Naylor, who has just experienced a painfully unplanned nicotine overdose, is told by his doctor that he must quit smoking immediately – even one more could kill him – and Naylor replies, "No problem. For how long?"

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It's a shame that, like chain-smokers nearing a finish line, the movie eventually runs out of steam. *Smoking*'s storyline is too dependent on an unconvincing turn wherein Naylor tells the reporter exactly what she wants to hear, and the film's rousing, climactic scene of Naylor testifying before a subcommittee – what Naylor refers to as his Jimmy Stewart moment – isn't Jimmy Stewart enough; it doesn't release the comic fireworks the situation promises and demands. But even in its bum sequences,

Thank You for Smoking

remains a mean, shrewd, witty creation, and through it all is Aaron Eckhart and his infectious snarkiness. In

Hamlet

, Shakespeare wrote, "One may smile, and smile, and be a villain." In *Thank You for Smoking,* that villain is also, incredibly, a hero.



LUCKY NUMBER SLEVIN

Lucky Number Slevin has one of those too-cute titles that makes you want to pinch it, but the moniker isn't an aberration; Paul McGuigan's entire movie, with its script by Jason Smilovic, seems overly fond of its own cleverness. The film is a knotty who's-screwing-whom thriller with the requisite surprise ending, but as the twists and turns don't have any particular meaning for the characters; the audience cares about them even less; and the "Gotcha!" climax is depressingly obvious. (

Slevin's casting director has done her job too well; in the film's introductory flashback, the face of a teenage kid – who bears an uncanny resemblance to one of the adult actors in the present-day scenes – gives away the movie's entire plot.)

Lucky Number Slevin

is a strange piece of work; nothing in it makes the least bit of sense, but nothing in it surprises you, either. The movie is striving too hard to be a dark-comedy classic, and the assembled cast certainly backs up its wannabe-hip aspirations; Morgan Freeman, Ben Kinglsey, Stanley Tucci, Danny Aiello, and Lucy Liu seem to be entertaining themselves, if not us. (The film's characters all have names such as The Boss, The Rabbi, and The Fairy, which I guess would make Josh Hartnett's phlegmatic lead The Waste of Space.) I didn't find the movie gripping in the least, but I'm not sure the filmmakers

cared

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if I did;

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is so in love with itself than an audience's love would be downright superfluous.