

Cruise in for a Bruisin': "Mission: Impossible III"

Written by Mike Schulz

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MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III

Call it envy, call it sour grapes, call it schadenfreude, but I'll admit to hugely enjoying the public meltdown of Tom Cruise, mostly because it's finally making him *interesting*. Cruise has always been too bland to be true. He's moderately proficient, and in several of his films – most recently *Collateral*

and

Minority Report

– he's even been impressive. But he has too few resources to draw upon as a performer. It would be hard to accuse Cruise of slouching on the job – he's determined and earnest, and you can sense him

trying

to suggest interior life. But his line readings have no surprise and his on-screen performances rarely

build

; whenever a new scene begins, Cruise appears to have forgotten everything his character experienced in his

previous

scenes. He can't seem to play more than one emotion, or one thought, at a time.

For years, this wasn't much of a problem. In the '80's and early '90s, he effortlessly floated through Hollywood swill (*Top Gun*, *Cocktail*, *Days of Thunder*) on sheer charm and that

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megawatt smile; he was so lightweight that he almost seemed to be

daring

you to take his movies, or his work in them, seriously. Yet he was shrewd enough, at least, to also tackle risky projects and work with first-rate directors; I'm no fan of Cruise's contributions to

The Color of Money

or

Born on the Fourth of July

or

Interview with the Vampire

, but at least he seemed to know that if he

ever

wanted to be taken seriously, he needed to work with the Scorseses and Stones and Neil Jordans. (Cruise, or his handlers, also had a keen eye for audience-friendly, middlebrow "prestige" pictures;

Rain Man, Far & Away, A Few Good Men

, and

The Firm

were all good career moves, if not good movies.)

Over the past decade, Cruise's taste in directors and material hasn't much changed, and it's yielded some fine things; Cameron Crowe's *Jerry Maguire* showcases Cruise at his best (being allowed to be funny *always* helps),

Paul Thomas Anderson successfully blended him into the

Magnolia

ensemble (though Frank T.J. Mackey is more Anderson's triumph than Cruise's), and despite their overscaled silliness, Brian De Palma's

Mission: Impossible

and John Woo's 2000 sequel appeared tailor-made for their leading man – the role of secret agent Ethan Hunt didn't require an actor so much as a

star

, and this, as we all know, Cruise can pull off in his sleep.

Yet in *Mission: Impossible III*, someone has made the disastrous decision to turn Ethan into a figure we're meant to *care* about, and unfortunately, the timing of its release has dovetailed with Cruise's recent inability (on-screen, at least) to be perceived as *human*

. Cruise has always been a ham in his films, working a little too hard to

convince

us of things – that he's in danger, that he's in love, and beyond all else, that he's sincere. But more often than not, he's an under

cooked

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ham; he doesn't attack his roles with any kind of performer's relish, and his characterizations are sadly devoid of personality.

When, in *MI3*, Ethan beams with adoration at his new fiancée (Michelle Monaghan), or trembles with grief at the loss of a colleague, or shrieks with rage at his nemesis (Philip Seymour Hoffman), Cruise goes through the motions ably enough, but you don't necessarily

buy

it; there's a lot of hard work on display but no instinct and no invention. Thankfully,

MI3

doesn't expect an audience to care about its plot – the script (by director J.J. Abrams, Alex Kurtzman, and Roberto Orci) is wisely cavalier about its own ridiculousness – but it

does

ask that you care about Ethan, and, with Cruise's gauche egocentrism at full throttle, that's asking a

lot

.

It would be unfair to compare Cruise's performance skills to those of Hoffman's, who exudes such exquisitely nonchalant, misanthropic malice that his simple act of picking up a drink can fill you with dread. But it's hard not to notice that *everyone* in *Mission: Impossible III* piques your interest more than Cruise does. Monaghan, Ving Rhames, Laurence Fishburne, Billy Crudup, Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Keri Russell, and Simon Pegg have all been given far less to do and are infinitely more varied and empathetic; by populating his film with such a roster of talent, is Cruise

trying

to draw unfavorable comparisons? (You certainly can't argue that the casting was beyond Cruise's control; he and Paula Wagner are

MI3

's producers.) Scene after scene finds Cruise's co-stars mopping up the floor with him, because they're not trying so hard – they're simply

being

. Cruise no longer seems

capable

of "being."

Is the movie *itself* a good time at least? Not so much. Abrams, of TV's *Alias* and *Lost*, proves he can do incoherent action nonsense as competently as other big-screen helmers, but the visuals are lacking in sharpness and detail – even the stunts'

pièce de résistance

, with Ethan attempting a Spider-Man atop Shanghai skyscrapers, looks crummy – and the momentum of the storyline is constantly interrupted with tedious romantic exchanges and

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"surprise" twists that aren't surprising in the least.

MI3

doesn't make use of Abrams' gifts for character-driven narrative and his knack for making audiences fully believe inherently preposterous setups; the film feels

exactly

like the third entry in a waning blockbuster franchise.

Will any of this matter to the Tom Cruise fans – even in light of the star's recent, shall we say, *eccentricity*

– who will ensure

Mission: Impossible III

's box-office success? Probably not. (Cruise hit a nadir as a performer in

War of the Worlds

, and no one seemed much bothered by that.) Cruise runs and jumps and sweats and emotes just the way his base will want him to. He also grins, of course, and I think it's that grin that bothers me most. At the end of

MI3

(with apologies to those of you who thought the film might have an

un

happy ending), after the world has been saved, Cruise unleashes that blinding smile and promptly erases all memory of the traumas Ethan previously endured; there isn't even a *hint*

of personal experience in that face. (You can argue that, in the movie's epilogue, time has elapsed since the final confrontation with the bad guys, but not

that

much time has elapsed; the cuts and bruises on Ethan's cheeks are still fresh.) In one fell swoop, Cruise eradicates everything the character – and we in the audience – experienced over the last two hours, and that smile no longer seems charming; it seems willfully clueless, and even a little nuts. (Ethan appears to be suffering from the same condition that Guy Pearce did in

Memento

.)

One of the more intriguing roles in Cruise's career has long been his first major one, in 1981's *Taps*

. Standing at his bedroom window at the film's end, Cruise's sweet-faced, seemingly stalwart military cadet, determined to protect his school and way of life – his image as a young hero – positions himself behind a machine gun and begins firing. I can't be alone in thinking that atypical role may yet prove prophetic.