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### ***THE LAKE HOUSE***

In *The Lake House*, Sandra Bullock plays Kate Forster, a Chicago doctor living in the glass-encased home of the movie's title. Upon abandoning her domicile for a move back to the city, Kate leaves a letter for the next tenant in the edifice's mailbox; the note is received by Keanu Reeves' architect Alex Winter, who responds, thus beginning a pen-pal relationship between the two. Based on their shared tastes, histories, and a fondness for melancholic gush, it's obvious the two are Meant for Each Other. But, unfortunately, a Happily Ever After doesn't appear in the offing, as there's a major hitch to their relationship: Kate lives in 2006, while Alex is firmly nestled in 2004.

That mailbox, you see, exists in some kind of unexplained loop in the space-time continuum, allowing the two to trade letters without regard for the tenets of physics (to say nothing of logic), and if you haven't yet rolled your eyes and thrown the paper across the room in a huff of "Are they *kidding?*", allow me to continue.

Kate and Alex want desperately to meet, and at one point, mid-film, they actually do. Alex discovers where it was in 2004 that Kate celebrated her birthday, and manages to get himself invited to the party being thrown for her by her boyfriend. He sees her - Kate, naturally, has no idea who Alex is - and as the party winds down, the pair finds themselves alone on the porch. Alex introduces himself, sits down next to Kate, and, in one extraordinary, unbroken five-minute shot, they talk.

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Written by Mike Schulz  
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They talk about Jane Austen and *Persuasion*, and about her parents, and during their conversation, Bullock and Reeves play off one another with remarkable acuity. There's nothing forced or phony about their banter, and the gentle laughs they share reveal a comfort level almost unseen in modern Hollywood romances; the duo suggests two people who, even on a first encounter, actually *are* destined to be together. At the end of the scene, Kate and Alex share a kiss (which is inevitably interrupted by Kate's beau), yet amazingly, the moment doesn't feel at all like a plot machination. It feels like an inevitability.

And it was at this point that I had to disregard my cynicism, take it on the chin, and admit it: *The Lake House*, against all expectation, was actually *working*.

In many ways, the film is sheer lunacy, like A.R. Gurney's *Love Letters* as adapted by Rod Serling. Neither Kate nor Alex treats the film's storyline as anything but a nuisance - both take a brief moment to marvel at the magical mailbox, and promptly accept the goings-on as a pesky stumbling block to their chaste, *really* -long-distance relationship. (We don't even get the thrill of having Keanu respond to the sci-fi happenings with a heartfelt "Whoa.")

Yet I think the choice to have Kate and Alex - not to mention their friends and family members - all but ignore the supernatural elements is actually a wise one, as the only thing that would be more nonsensical than *The Lake House's* plotting would be an attempt to *explain* its plotting. Once you accept the film's romance-through-the-years goofiness as a given - the way you accept the life-in-a-funhouse-mirror world of *Being John Malkovich* - you're free to enjoy *The Lake House*

as cheesy piece of romantic fluff, one that's aided enormously by director Alejandro Agresti's unexpectedly inventive visuals. (Agresti pulls off some lovely sequences that simulate Kate and Alex "conversing" through their letters.) The dialogue in David Auburn's screenplay is rather banal, but the storytelling certainly isn't, and so far as I could tell, the movie plays fair; working over the film's climax on the way home from the theatre, I was astonished that the pieces to the

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puzzle actually  
*did*  
fit.

None of this may have worked, though, had Bullock and Reeves not convinced us of their characters' affections, and it's a pleasure to write that, in *The Lake House*, the *Speed* co-stars make a dream of a romantic pairing. The match-up really shouldn't work - Reeves is always at his best when he's not taking himself so seriously, while Bullock's gravity is her most appealing trait - but the stars, even when only trading voice-overs, bring out something radiant and touching in one another, and that warmth permeates the whole film. (Christopher Plummer and Shohreh Aghdashloo turn underwritten roles into wonderfully human figures.) As a large-scale romantic weepie, the movie is far more honest and moving than something such as *The Notebook*

. You can giggle at its premise all you want - Lord knows

/

did - but somehow, the talents behind

*The Lake House*

have turned a laughable concept into something that even a natural cynic would have a tough time resisting. Those bastards.



**NACHO LIBRE**

Comedians have a way of turning reviewers into hypocrites, and I'm certainly no exception. Had *Nacho Libre* - the latest comedy by *Napoleon Dynamite* helmer Jared Hess - starred Adam Sandler, or Rob Schneider, or some other comic whose talents escape me, I might have found the movie unbearable. ("Mexican friar becomes wrestler" is a pretty fair description of the plot, and the movie, unlike *Napoleon*, is criminally short on memorable second bananas.) But it stars Jack Black. And at this stage in his career, Black makes me laugh like no one else. When he gets rolling in *Nacho Libre*

- soliloquizing while his enormous gut hangs over his tights, composing a hysterical love ballad to the nun he adores, tossing a pair of feral dwarfs around the ring - the movie's weaknesses (and there are plenty of them) seem insignificant. Hess' intentionally stoic compositions still

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provide amusement - his characters are more than deadpan, they're  
*embalmed*

pan - but for my money, the only time

*Nacho Libre*

really scores is when the movie proper is ignored in favor of Jack Black just doing his Jack Black thing. Is

*Nacho Libre*

any good? Not really. Did I care?

*Hell*

, no.



### ***GARFIELD: A TAIL OF TWO KITTIES***

The best thing about *Garfield: A Tail of Two Kitties* is its running length: 75 minutes. The *worst* thing about the movie is that it's still about 75 minutes too long. Admittedly, there wasn't much chance that I was going to enjoy the film - the 2004

*Garfield*

movie had already proved that the chubby tabby's charms should be relegated to a three-strip panel - but I wasn't prepared for the obscene waste of talent on display in the sequel. It's bad enough that the gifted Breckin Meyer would (again) find no outlet for his quick-wittedness, and that Bill Murray, vocalizing peerlessly bad jokes, sounds about five seconds away from suicide. But aside from living overseas, what on earth did Billy Connolly, Roger Rees, and the divine Lucy Davis do to deserve such foul treatment here? Can this series please be neutered before Juliette Binoche and Jean Reno get suckered into

*Garfield in Gay Purr-ee*

?