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TALLADEGA NIGHTS: THE BALLAD OF RICKY BOBBY

The Will Ferrell spoof *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby,* like the actor's *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*
, is less a movie than a sketch-comedy figure with a little bit of movie draped around him. And despite its narrow conceit - again, just like
Anchorman -
it isn't bad at all.

Directed by Adam McKay, and with a script credited to its director and star, the film doesn't feature a plot so much as a series of skits in which Ferrell's cluelessly egocentric NASCAR racer endures humiliation and occasional triumph on the road to Talladega, but *Talladega Nights*
(intentionally, I'm sure) doesn't work very hard at convincing us that we're watching a character. We're watching
Ferrell
, and for his fans in the audience, that's more than enough - at the screening I attended, the crowd laughed in
preparation
for Ferrell's comic routines, especially the ones we've seen too many times in the movie's omnipresent trailers. (I actually heard someone behind me laugh to his friend, "Oh, this is the scene where he's gonna run around in his underwear!") For those who love the comedian's unique blend of hostility and disengagement, his stylized knack for ironically commenting on his performance without ever really
giving
a performance,
Talledega Nights
could easily be comedy heaven.

It's sort of fun for the rest of us, too. Nothing in the movie makes much sense - characters, particularly Bobby's big-hearted dolt of a best friend (winningly played by John C. Reilly), change alliances, and even personalities, depending on the needs of a scene - but *Talladega Nights* featu
res a bunch of really shrewd comic observations, and the satire, oftentimes, is surprisingly subversive. The devoted may roar at their hero screaming with a knife stuck in his thigh, but I

was more taken with the film's clever product-placement parodies, in which Bobby's endorsement deal with Fig Newtons reaches a hilarious inevitability. Or when Amy Adams' rousing, you-can-
do
-it-Ricky speech reaches a comically passionate zenith. Or when Bobby's adversary makes his first appearance, and he's revealed to be most loathsome character imaginable to the NASCAR fan base - a pompous gay French man. (Sacha Baron Cohen, speaking as though he's trying to juggle his lines and a dozen marbles in his mouth simultaneously, makes this ennui-filled blowhard a priceless comic caricature.)
Talladega Nights
is sloppy and disorganized and runs out of steam long before the climax, but it's filled with enjoyable performers - Jane Lynch, Gary Cole, Molly Shannon, Leslie Bibb - and throwaway sequences, and for a movie this proudly, profoundly stupid, it's unexpectedly smart
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MIAMI VICE

In the final third of *Miami Vice*, writer/director Michael Mann's screen version of his seminal cops-and-drugs TV series, there's a scene we've seen variants on countless times before. Held hostage by a group of drug runners, a woman - the girlfriend of one of the leading characters - sits strapped to a chair lined with explosives; it's up to our heroes to rescue her before her captor hits the detonator. Yet in Mann's hands, this familiar sequence is almost unbearably exciting. The director's exquisite staging, the gorgeously suggestive cinematography, the razor-sharp precision of the editing, and the subtly relentless score combine in dazzling fashion; the scene is a cliché, yet Mann lends it such vibrancy that you feel like you're seeing this action-flick staple for the very first time, and it features not one but two gasp-worthy climaxes. The chutzpah of it makes you want to applaud.

There are random sequences like this throughout *Miami Vice*, but sadly, nowhere near enough of them; the movie, more often than not, is a beautifully directed bore. Technically, Mann's achievement can hardly be faulted, yet the technique comes at the expense of personality; even the cooler-than-cool blitheness of the TV series had more humanity. It's a strenuous, humorless

piece of work - would a joke now and again have killed anyone? - and while Jamie Foxx's electric presence salvages his Ricardo Tubbs, Colin Farrell's mopey Sonny Crockett is a major drain on the film. Detective work can be exhausting, I'm sure, but Farrell seems barely able to keep his eyes open. (The actor intones his dialogue with a scratchy baritone that, at times, sounds almost laughably forced - I spent half the film wanting to hand him a lozenge.) If *Miami Vice* 's storyline were more interesting - or more *coherent* - Mann's savviness would probably compensate for a lack of emotional involvement, but this movie feels too much like routine television pumped up to feature-film status, and it's so determinedly dour (and dull) that I actually would have *welcomed* a few commercial breaks.

THE NIGHT LISTENER

In *The Night Listener,* Robin Williams plays the host of a late-night radio show who becomes emotionally attached to a caller who may not exist, and the film is so slight that it doesn't appear to exist, either. Based on a novel by Armistead Maupin, the movie has a reasonably gripping storyline, but it's gripping almost by accident - the audience is left trying to determine just what the hell the movie *is*. Is it a character drama involving a lonely man reaching out for companionship? A suspense-thriller with Williams the butt of some treacherous joke? A cautionary tale about the perils of AM radio? (While we're trying to figure it out, Williams delivers a resigned, honest performance; entertaining actors such as Bobby Cannavale and Sandra Oh grapple with contrived, purely functional roles; and Toni Collette does her staunchly eccentric Toni Collette thing.) *The Night Listener,* whi le earnest as all get-out, becomes more and more tedious as it progresses, and finally ends on a note of unsatisfying, anecdotal vagueness; you would find yourself asking "That's *it* ?" if the film had an "it" in the first place.

THE DESCENT

The best horror movies have the simplest premises, and on paper at least, writer/director Neil Marshall's *The Descent* is a *great* horror movie: Six female friends go caving in the Appalachian mountains, become trapped, and must find a way out of their catacomb without becoming dinner for the hideous, shrieking, cannibalistic bat-creatures residing within. Unfortunately, though, *The Descent isn't* a great horror movie. Despite the cast's solid efforts, the underwritten characters are frustratingly interchangeable, the whiplash editing and constant darkness often make the action impossible to follow, and while the monstrous cave dwellers are suitably horrific, they don't make much sense - I'm fine with them being unable to see and hear, but shouldn't they be able to feel close proximity to *fire*? Yet *The Descent* has more than enough scares to satisfy the horror junkies among us - the visuals are enjoyably revolting and the sound effects quite superb - and by the time the remaining adventurers are going *mano a mano* with the marauding beasts, Marshall has worked you into a vengeful boil; I, too, was happy to reach daylight at the film's end, but if anyone had decided to return to the cave for one more crack at gouging out a creature's eyeballs with their thumbs, I would have been completely on board.