



SNAKES ON A PLANE

Incessant buildup for a potential Hollywood blockbuster is nothing new, of course. But in the case of *Snakes on a Plane*, it was the *nature* of the buildup that proved fascinating; everything hyped about this cheesy scare flick - the hysterically candid title, the presence of Samuel L. Jackson in bellowing motherf---er mode, the re-tooling to secure an R rating from its original PG-13 - seemed to promise, "This movie is gonna suck, and you're gonna

love

it." Offhand, I can't think of another movie that was so aggressively - one might say

honestly

- marketed as the schlock it was almost certain to be. By the time the movie opened last Friday, the anticipation among connoisseurs of cinematic crap had reached such a fever pitch that nothing less than the Best Bad Movie of All Time would do.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Snakes on a Plane* isn't the best bad movie of all time. But it'll *still* do.

To enjoy the movie, though, you have to not only accept its crumminess but *embrace* it. The screenwriters and director David R. Ellis present characters so clichéd and situations so stock that your jaw nearly drops; for long stretches,

Snakes

feels like

Airplane!

as remade by filmmakers who didn't understand it was meant as a

spoof

. Yet if you not only know but kinda

love

the tenets of crap thrillers - and crap

airborne

thrillers in particular - the movie can put you in a state of almost constant happiness; no one involved appears to be treating

Snakes on a Plane

as anything other than the joyous nonsense it is. (If

Lady in the Water

had demonstrated this type of insouciance, it, too, might have been enormous fun.)

Schlock Appeal: "Snakes on a Plane," "Step Up," "Little Miss Sunshine," and "Pulse"

Written by Mike Schulz

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When the plane's passengers are first introduced, they prove to be an assemblage of such brashly one-note caricatures that I half-expected the arrival of a nun with a guitar. The brazen ludicrousness of the plotting, which goes to insane lengths to make its ridiculous storyline *believable*

is nearly as entertaining as the faux sentimental touches - the burgeoning romances, the plucky children in jeopardy - that movies of this ilk are inevitably graced with. And when Jackson goes off on one of his patented Samuel L. Jackson tirades - all bad-ass aggression and bluster - I laughed heartily, as I'm sure the actor hoped we would; delivering his outbursts with both a sneer and a wink, Jackson might be

daring

us to take this material seriously. Thankfully, it's unimaginable that anyone *could*.

What's keeping the movie from being worse - and therefore *better* - than it is? Well, the dispatching of much of the plane's snake bait - especially the stuffy British twit who, *à la*

W.C. Fields, loathes children and animals - is deliriously nasty (as is the unexpectedly swift demise of one of those animals), and Ellis stages the first big reptilian attack with hilariously creepy gusto; it's a stitch watching the passenger list, including a number of laconic he-men, turn into hyperventilating, shrieking wrecks. A few of the visual reveals, such as the mid-film arrival of an enormous boa constrictor, are wittily handled. And there are even a couple of performers here who cut through their stereotypes with eccentric bursts of humanity; Todd Louiso plays a twitchy snake expert with comically aggrieved exasperation, and before he begins spouting tough-guy banalities, Bobby Cannavale's FBI agent - insinuating that his new desk job is giving him more time with his family than he

wants

- is a funny, rumped presence.

But these are aberrations. Most of the movie is proudly, profoundly stupid, and considering that its pre-release hype *told* us as much, it's all the more enjoyable for being so. *Snakes on a Plane* is something we haven't seen much of in the summer of 2006 - a movie that delivers *exactly*

what it promised - and while it may not be any kind of bastion of cinematic quality, it's surely one of the least

disappointing

movies of the season.



STEP UP

Step Up is like the *Snakes on a Plane* of dance movies. There isn't a scene, a plot twist, or even a *line* that you can't see coming a mile off, and if you're looking for nothing more than a pleasant time-waster showcasing a few good moves, it'll easily fit the bill. The plot is a Greatest Hits blend of

Flashdance, *Footloose*, *Dirty Dancing*

, et al - it's like a dance-movie smoothie - and is so nakedly sincere about its clichés that the sweet-natured obviousness of it all is rather disarming; the film doesn't have an original thought in its head, but in a determinedly cornball venture such as

Step Up

, who wants to bother with

thinking

? Leads Channing Tatum (like a beefy Josh Hartnett with even less charisma) and Jenna

Dewan (who could be Denise Richards' petulant younger sister) are terrible actors, but

personality would almost be antithetical to a sleekly zippy enterprise such as this one;

Step Up

is vacuous and blithely disconnected from any kind real world, and, for a movie of its type, I'm not sure I would've wanted it any other way.



LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

The acting sextet that forms *Little Miss Sunshine's* ensemble is so spectacular that I was continually annoyed at the unfunny, inconceivable situations screenwriter Michael Arndt kept forcing them into. As a squabbling Arizona family that embarks on a road trip to a junior beauty contest in California, Greg Kinnear, Toni Collette, Steve Carell, Alan Arkin, Paul Dano, and the wonderfully naturalistic tyke Abigail Breslin all seem firmly connected to their roles, bicker with sensational, familial irritation, and have wonderfully touching moments throughout; Carell's

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despondent heartache and Dano's (often literal) voiceless resentment play especially well. But the film, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, is as broad as the actors are subtle, and the dichotomy between the characterizations and the material is frustrating; nearly every one of the family's kooky adventures - which involve a mini-bus with a shoddy clutch, an unexpected death, a couple of highway traumas, and the eventual, garish pageant - reads as nothing but phony. (Even the plot makes little sense, as you can't fathom how the charmingly awkward Breslin could have landed in that pageant in the first place.) The exemplary contributions of the cast make

Sunshine

Little Miss

worth

seeing, but the movie is still a disappointment; I'm not sure what I expected from the work, but I think these actors - and the audience - deserved something more than

National Lampoon's Indie Vacation.



PULSE

Director Jim Sonzero's *Pulse*, the Americanization of Kiyoshi Kurosawa's 2001 Japanese horror film, has a jazzy idea at its core: Supernatural beings have taken over our electronics, and are causing youthful techno-junkies to kill themselves. For a teenage demographic married to their cell phones and iPods, this may strike a particular nerve; at least, it might have if the film itself weren't so inept. Yet the cheap scare tactics, senseless plotting, and lack of any emotional involvement make the movie a long yawn; the only thing being killed here is time.

Pulse

's thesis - that life without technology has, for today's youth, become unthinkable - is absorbing, but it's also scarier than anything in the movie itself.