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IDLEWILD

It's pretty clear that a musical doesn't know what it's doing when Ben Vereen and Patti LaBelle appear in supporting roles and the movie doesn't let them *sing*. But writer/director Bryan Barber's *Idlewild* isn't all that concerned with being a musical. It's concerned with being a music *video*. This tune-laden, period gangster/show-biz drama - fronted by OutKast's Andre Benjamin and Antwan A. Patton (a.k.a. Andre 3000 and Big Boi) - is all touches and visual motifs, and while it's earnest, it's also devoid of emotional connection; we admire the pretty images but don't necessarily *feel* anything for it. *Idlewild* is a fascinating failure. It's a movie you really *want* to like - especially if you're a fan of musicals - but one that only comes alive in fits and spurts.

Too bad, because the material - hoary and clichéd though it is - would appear to be ripe for a modern musical re-telling. Benjamin and Patton play Percival and Rooster, lifelong friends in Depression-era Georgia; Percival is a sullen piano player at a juke joint called the Church, and Rooster is the bar's main song-and-dance attraction. During the course of the film, Percival falls for a sweet chanteuse (Paula Patton) with a hidden past, and Rooster - an unfaithful husband

with five kids - gets mixed up with mobsters; as their stories intertwine, we are presented with random musical numbers (including intentionally anachronistic hip-hop songs) both on- and *off*-stage, and *Idlewild* emerges as a hybrid of *The Cotton Club, Moulin Rouge*, and a Jimmy Cagney gangster epic.

That's the idea, at any rate, and it's an enormously ambitious one. But while Barber is inventive with some of his stylistic flourishes - the cuckoo clocks that perform backup are a nice touch, as is the engraved rooster that comes alive on its owner's flask - he can't make the hackneyed plotting play as anything but derivative; Barber, unlike Baz Luhrmann, doesn't yet possess the stylistic grace to transcend *Idlewild*'s built-in clichés. The familiarity of the storyline is a drag - there isn't one subplot here that we haven't sat through in dozens of other movies - and the characters are mere *types*; with nothing to play but varying degrees of one note, the film's actors, including such talents as Ving Rhames, Bill Nunn, and Cicely Tyson, are left to flounder. (Terrence Howard, as *Idlewild*'s chief villain, seems oddly impatient and uncomfortable, as if he's waiting for *his* big musical number, which never arrives.) As for Benjamin and Patton, they're charming and banter with one another adroitly, but they don't perform so much as posture; as in a music video, *Idlewild* showcases their *presence*, but doesn't suggest much else.

None of this would have mattered much if the musical numbers were great - if their songs and dances are performed well, musicals can get away with a *multitude* of sins - but the songs are instantly forgettable, and the film's few dance sequences are so percussively edited that, ironically, they have *no* rhythm; the film's choreography is by the legendary dancer Hinton Battle, and with Barber's restless composition, staging, and cutting, we can't even glean if it's any *good*. (Perversely, *Idlewild*'s one sustained musical number - the only one not interrupted by flashes to other storylines - comes during the closing credits.) The film looks terrific; its period detail is lushly designed without being ostentatious, and Barber earns major points for even *attempting* this foray into a sadly neglected film genre. But as a musical - as a

movie -
Idlewild
just doesn't move. The "idle" portion of the title is accurate, but "wild" is exactly what the movie is not
.

ACCEPTED

Justin Long isn't quite a star - not *yet*, at any rate - but he has the confidence of a star, and has at least since *Jeepers Creepers* in 2001. Like a young Jeff Goldblum, Long has a dryly acidic wit but isn't alienating; his sincerity keeps him from being off-putting, and for a sneaky, sardonic comedian, he has terrific audience empathy. (When he was continually pummeled in the nuts in
Dodgeball
, the comic violence of the attacks made you laugh - at
first
- but your heart still went out to him.)
Long, at this point in his career, is something film comedy can always use more of: a completely

likable
smart-ass.

Someday soon, Long may land a leading role in a movie that deserves him. Until then, we'll have to be satisfied with director Steve Pink's *Accepted*, a dopey but good-natured slob comedy in which Long plays a high-school student who invents his own college after his applications to legitimate schools are denied. Leasing and refurbishing an abandoned mental hospital (the financial and practical details of this are blithely glossed over), Long and his loser allies create a haven for similar undesirables, with course titles such as "Doing Nothing" and "How to Blow Stuff Up with Your Mind." By the time the stuffed shirts at a rival college threaten to shut the place down, the movie has turned into yet another paean to youthful slacker-hood, arguing that Long's unconventional institution is preferable to actual universities that - and I think this is a quote in the movie - "destroy your passion and creativity."

I'm enough of an education hound - and middle-aged crank - to be mildly offended by this. *Accepted* isn't telling its young audience that it's okay if you're not accepted into college; it's saying that you shouldn't want to go to college in the *first* place. (You feel like telling these kids that college will only destroy your passion and creativity if you *let* it.) And even if you are on-board with what I hesitate to call the movie's thesis, you still have to deal with *Accepted*'s tired, us-versus-them plotting and *de rigueur* sentimentality; for a comedy about the joys of nonconformity, it conforms with its genre specifications pretty thoroughly.

Yet the movie is a lot smarter than it pretends to be, and a lion's share of that credit goes to Long. His reactions and readings are lightning-quick here, and he makes a lot of moments work by giving his biting retorts a genial spin; when Long, conversing with a preppy blowhard, makes an offhand reference about the rival school's anti-Semitism, the joke comes so fast, and is delivered with such disarming pleasantness, that the prep reacts the only way he should - with a slightly confused smile, as if he only *thought* he heard what he did. Long isn't able to pull off *all* the shtick he's required to here - his rock-and-roll number, for instance, doesn't quite work. (Then again, it didn't quite work for Michael J. Fox in *Back to the Future*, either.) But he does his best to make *Accepted* a rather entertaining goof.

I just wish this comedy wasn't so hell-bent on giving higher education a black eye. Any movie that gives Long the chance to be an inspired leading man, and that has his on-screen best friend (a laugh-out-loud funny goober played by Jonah Hill) refer to himself as Long's "*de facto* consigliere," can't be *completely* anti-intellect.