Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 19 September 2006 22:34

THE BLACK DAHLIA

The opening sequence of Brian De Palma's L.A. *noir The Black Dahlia* is so busily choreographed that, at first, you think it has to be some sort of put-on. A melee involving a street full of cops and sailors in downtown Los Angeles circa 1946, the balletic, slow-motion punching and flailing is orchestrated within an inch of its life; nothing about it seems real, but it's so dazzlingly executed that you hardly care. But with Josh Hartnett's ersatz tough-guy narration droning away, it quickly becomes clear that the scene isn't meant to be funny. It isn't comedy that De Palma's going after here but stylization, and as *The Black Dahlia* progresses, it's obvious that the director doesn't have the cast or screenwriter required to give his baroque touches a context. A few nastily enjoyable moments aside, the film is dour, dull, and confusing, enlivened only by a few zesty supporting portrayals and whatever directorial wit De Palma can bring to it.

A knotty crime thriller in the vein of *L.A. Confidential* - also based on a book by James Ellroy - *The Black Dahlia* concerns the murder investigation of wannabe Hollywood starlet Elizabeth Short, but whatever lurid entertainment there is to be had here comes solely from the sidelines; Hilary Swank gives a hammy, deliriously lascivious performance as one of the film's many *femmes fatales*, and seen solely in flashback, Mia Kirshner's Elizabeth, with wide, haunted eyes, carries an air of hushed mystery. Screenwriter Josh Friedman, though, doesn't arrange Ellroy's plotlines into any sort of cohesive narrative. We're inundated with exposition and information, yet it doesn't have any particular bite, and coming from Hartnett and the unusually stiff Scarlett Johansson and Aaron Eckhart, it all borders on the meaningless anyway.

The actors here seem less directed than *posed* - everything about their performances feels oddly italicized, as if they're commenting on *noir* rather than playing it. These leads, as directed, are too lightweight for *The Black Dahlia*; it's easy to zone out on the numerous twists and turns because, really, who cares about those doing the twisting and turning?
De Palma comes through with some spectacular shots in

The Black Dahlia
, yet the movie is soulless; stylization is fine, but in order for it to work, you need participants willing to exude some
style.

GRIDIRON GANG

Isn't it strange how, sometimes, you won't see an actor onscreen for years, and then you'll see him in two movies in the same day? In *The Black Dahlia*, the role of Elizabeth Short's ne'er-do-well father is played by veteran character actor Kevin Dunn, and although he's isn't around for long - only a scene - Dunn is one of the few performers who suggest what
Dahlia
's tone
should
have been: seedy, lived-in, and grimly funny. The cameo was a welcome reminder of Dunn's talents, and so it was a terrific surprise when, less than an hour after leaving the
Black Dahlia
auditorium, I sat down for a screening of
Gridiron Gang
, and saw the actor again, this time playing a school administrator understandably nervous about letting a group of gang-bangers play football on his field. Dunn, pro that he is, is just fine in
Gridiron Gang.
Unfortunately, his appearance was the only surprise in the movie.

Theoretically, the fact that *Gridiron Gang* is devoid of surprises shouldn't *be* much of a surprise; director Phil Joanou's movie basically combines the tenets of the inspirational-teacher flick with the tenets of the inspirational-sports flick into one ultra-inspirational package. But the film's edgy, violent opening minutes make you think that
Gridiron Gang
just might be tougher than you'd expect, and with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson playing coach to an incendiary group of juvenile detainees, there's early indication that the movie

won't
get all soft and squishy on us.

Alas. Before the end of the first reel, the young, misunderstood thieves and killers are revealing their sensitive sides, the violins on the soundtrack are emoting like hell, and Johnson is making maudlin speeches about how his losers can become winners "as long as you have heart." Though based on a true story, nothing about the depressingly calculated *Gridiron Gang* plays as anything but phony, and even when you think the movie
isn't
going to indulge in every last cliché in the book, you're proved wrong. When we were first introduced to the team's water-boy - a scrappy little charmer with a mile-wide grin, cutely named Bug - I muttered to myself, "Well,
he's
dead." But after
Gridiron Gang
's climactic Big Game, the kid, amazingly, was still alive. What a nice surprise, I thought. Then came the movie's postscript, where we're told what happened to
Gridiron Gang
's characters after being released from juvenile detention. Bug was killed in a drive-by shooting. Damn.
So
close.

THE LAST KISS

In Tony Goldwyn's *The Last Kiss*, written by *Crash*'s Paul Haggis, Zach Braff plays an architect having a miniature nervous breakdown as he approaches his 30th birthday; he sees life with his beautiful, loving, pregnant girlfriend (Jacinda Barrett)
as a trap - the end of whatever surprises life has to offer - and, as many men do, does his best to screw it up, bemoaning the loss of his freedom and falling for a willing college student (Rachel Bilson). For today's men, the film argues, 29 is simultaneously the new middle age and the new adolescence, and I can see how, if you land on

The Last Kiss
at the right time in your life, the movie could easily speak to you, and even seem profound.

I remain unconvinced. Haggis' mopey didacticism weighs on all of the film's characters - Braff's three male buddies are similarly plagued with affectless yearning, and even Barrett's parents, played by Blythe Danner and Tom Wilkinson, are caught up in the ennui-laden, existential turmoil. And although the actors do their best to pull off all the life-crisis whining, they remain purely conceptual. (When Bilson's collegiate tells Braff, "I could be your last chance at happiness," that isn't a character talking - it's a *screenwriter* talking.) With Goldwyn's too-neatly-composed images of yuppie angst and a score suffused with plaintive indie folk rock, *The Last Kiss* could be *Magnolia* redone as a fraternity skit; it feels like something Haggis wrote ages ago and then tucked away in the bottom drawer of his desk, and if this is indeed true, that's where it should have stayed.

THE PROTECTOR

There are some cool action sequences in Prachya Pinkaew's *The Protector*, including one in which the camera smoothly glides between two trains while martial-arts star Tony Jaa kicks ass and breaks spines en route to saving his missing pet. But to enjoy them, you'll have to sit through some 80 minutes of god-awful acting and wretched Thai-into-English dubbing. The subtitled dialogue, though, is frequently hilarious - I've narrowed down my favorite line to "Where is my elephant?", "What have you done with my elephant?", and the priceless "Get your hands off my elephant!" Worshippers at the shrine of Quentin Tarantino - who "presents" the film - may find *The Protector* kitschily enjoyable, but the folks at PETA should positively *adore* it.