Written by Mike Schulz
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THE NATIVITY STORY

After more than an hour of noble attempts and unfortunate - though unembarrassing - failings, director Catherine Harwicke, in her biblical tale of *The Nativity Story*, finally lands upon the style she appears to have been aiming for all along. Mary (Keisha Castle-Hughes) has just given birth to Jesus, and as she lies in the manger alongside her husband, Joseph (Oscar Isaac), a blinding shaft of light descends from the heavens and lands directly on the holy family, creating a tableaux that is at once instantly familiar and freshly moving.

The light is seen from afar by the three wise men - a vaguely comical trio of Eriq Ebouaney, Stefan Kalipha, and Nadim Sawalha - and when they finally arrive upon the birth site, the men's countenances duly reflect the astonishment of what they're seeing; their eyes, brimming with tears, are full of wonder, and as they present their gifts with ceremonial awe, they exude humility and unutterable joy. Mychael Danna's musical score, meanwhile, reflects the import of the scene without oppressive sanctimony, and for a moment - thankfully, for this story, the *right* moment - Hardwicke finds the perfect balance between the expected, stoic pageantry of biblical epics and the naturalism she brought to 2003's
Thirteen
. The scene can truly be called divine.

If only more sequences felt just like it! But for most of its length, *The Nativity Story* is a dry and awfully dull re-telling of the Christmas miracle - always earnest, rarely inspired. There's very little about the movie that one could mock - even Mike Rich's dialogue is less awkward than you'll usually find in this sort of thee-and-thou-laden work - and many of the performances, especially those of Isaac and Shohreh Aghdashloo, appear deeply felt. (Despite the occasional flashes of her impossibly sweet smile, though, Castle-Hughes' Mary is rather depersonalized.)

Yet you leave without any sense of what drew Hardwicke to the material in the first place. Say what you will about Mel Gibson's *Passion* (and I've said plenty), but at least it *had* passion; *The Nativity Story*
is sincere and professional, but it isn't
alive

- Hardwicke's movie is like a better-produced version of the recent
One Night with the King
. While no one is advocating the return of Cecil B. DeMille, this new work could have used some of the pomp and flash he brought to his biblical epics. The song tells us that the baby Jesus spent his away-in-a-manger period asleep on the hay, but movie audiences shouldn't find themselves compelled to
join
him.

BOBBY

During the opening minutes of *Bobby*, writer/director Emilio Estevez's imagined take on events leading up to Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel, it's fair to say that your curiosity is piqued. As he introduces roughly two dozen characters, all converging in the Ambassador on June 4, 1968, you're eager to see what Estevez plans to do with his intertwining plotlines, his loose narrative structure, and his almost ridiculously star-studded cast, many of whom you're excited to see just because it's been so long since you
last
saw them. Look at that - Harry Belafonte! Heather Graham! Emilio himself!

Soon enough, though, my delight turned into something else entirely, and I left the theatre thinking: Poor Harry. Poor Heather. And poor, poor Emilio, who - with this hugely ambitious yet laughably inept undertaking - shot for the heavens and missed by a *considerable* margin. Estevez can hardly be blamed for the timing, but the recent passing of Robert Altman just accentuates how melodramatic and phony
Bobby
actually is; aiming for the sprawling, character-driven style that Altman was famed for, Estevez's one-note caricatures and their subtext-heavy dialogue land with a thud. Documentary footage aside, there isn't a single scene here that bears any resemblance to the real world; actors such as Anthony Hopkins, William H. Macy, Sharon Stone, Lindsay Lohan, Laurence Fishburne, Demi Moore, Helen Hunt, Christian Slater, and Martin Sheen (such a supportive dad) deliver pithy, spirit-of-the-'60s generalizations and try to keep us from noticing their fraudulence.
Bobby

has nothing but the most honorable of intentions, and it's clear that Estevez's heart was in the project. I'm just wondering where his
head
was.

DECK THE HALLS

'Tis the season to give thanks for the many blessings bestowed upon us, yet I'm not sure I can adequately thank Kristin Chenoweth for single-handedly making *Deck the Halls* bearable. While slumped in my seat, preparing to endure the latest in Hollywood's annual run of obscenely garish, achingly unfunny holiday slapsticks, I noticed Chenoweth's name in the opening credits, and I immediately perked up. The first time I saw her on-screen, I reflexively grinned - this adorable, feisty comedienne has a way of putting me in a great mood
instantly
. The first time I saw her standing next to screen husband Danny DeVito, the diminutive (4-foot-11) Chenoweth towering over him, it took all my will not to cackle at the comic perfection of the pairing. Whenever she had a halfway-decent line in the movie, she got her laugh. Whenever she had a sentimental moment, her natural sincerity kept the scene from being maudlin. And when, at the end, she began singing "O Holy Night" - her crystalline soprano embracing the lyrics with genuine warmth - I was positively bewitched, and for a brief time, the movie actually radiated the seasonal spirit it spends so much energy paying lip service to. The majority of
Deck the Halls
is witless, and oafish, and as obnoxious as you'd expect - a fat lump of coal in our collective Christmas stocking. So thank you, Ms. Chenoweth, for occasionally squeezing that lump into a diamond.

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