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APOCALYPTO

There was a lot that I hated about Mel Gibson's Mayan-language action epic *Apocalypto*.

I hated the obviousness of the opening 20 minutes, with the director crudely working overtime to make the Mayans "relatable." (Look! They played practical jokes! And teased their friends about their sex lives! And gave blow jobs! Just like us!) I hated the way Gibson was cranking up the audience's bloodlust via the sentimental idylls; our hero, Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood), is given not only a sage, loving father and a devoted, nine-months-pregnant wife, but perhaps the cutest toddler on God's green earth.

I hated the inevitable first attack on our peaceful Mayans, when I realized that this movie might wind up more soullessly gory than *Braveheart* and *The Passion of the Christ combined*. I hated the artless exuberance the director took in the torture and massacre of the Good Mayans, whom he just spent 20 minutes getting us to empathize with. Gibson isn't looking to shock and awe; he's looking for people to stand on their theatre seats and scream, "
Kill
those Evil Mayan bastards!"

Shall I continue? I hated the supernatural flourishes - the prophetic dreams and the creepy little girl with the mystical ramblings - that were reminiscent of the worst of Oliver Stone. I hated that the movie was so often gore-for-gore's-sake, as when we witness the Mayans' human-sacrifice ritual atop a holy tower, in which the victims are impaled, and their heads are cut off and rolled down the steps. Gibson doesn't just show us this once, which would be quite enough, but follows the repellent sequence by having *another* human sacrifice brought in, and put through the exact same ritual (in case we were at the concession stand, I suppose). I hated the *Passion* -like wailing and keening that accompanied these scenes on the soundtrack, as if Gibson, after repeatedly ladling on the gore, suddenly began to feel *guilty* about it.

I hated the sense that all of this *outré* violence - including in a scene that indirectly echoes those irresponsible Russian-roulette sequences in *The Deer Hunter* - was meant to be taken as historical truth. (If *Apocalypto* was just a routine action pic, why the English subtitles, right?) I hated Gibson's willingness to trash the film's tone for the sake of an easy laugh; for two hours, the film's English translations - the early sexual joshing aside - had been models of expository decorum, but after a particularly loathsome character gets bitten in the neck by an asp, Gibson can't resist the subtitle: "He's fucked." I hated the movie's sneering, B-grade villains. I hated the movie's insistence on putting children in peril to raise the stakes. I hated how, in the end, *Apocalypto* had turned into an artsy remake of *Rambo* .

But you know what I hated the most? The fact that Mel Gibson knows what he's doing. For a certain audience - his base, if you will - everything it seems Gibson wants to accomplish he *does* accomplish; at the screening I attended, you could feel members of the audience getting worked up through the sheer relentlessness of his storytelling, and by the time Jaguar Paw was exacting revenge, the gruesome retaliations were being greeted with audible "*Yeah!*"s. The movie seems to work for some people the way *Dances with Wolves* did (but with far more bloodshed).

Yet the depressing truth is that it works for some of the rest of us, too. The movie may be repugnant, but *Apocalypto* is certainly technically accomplished, and it holds your interest in a way that Gibson's last film didn't. Remedial though it is, the movie does have a strong narrative thrust, it isn't without humor and visceral thrills, and Gibson is actually quite expert at the building of suspense (when he deigns to do such a thing). It should also be mentioned that, even with a running time of some 135 minutes, I was never bored, not *once*, and by the film's end, I was forced to admit that as loathsome as the movie is, is does its job effectively, and you might even say *passionately*.

And I *really* hate Gibson for that.

THE HOLIDAY

In writer/director Nancy Meyers' *The Holiday*, Kate Winslet plays an unlucky-in-love newspaper columnist who wants to escape both England and the cad who treats her badly (Rufus Sewell). Cameron Diaz plays an unlucky-in-love movie-trailer magnate who wants to escape both Los Angeles and the cad who treats her badly (Edward Burns). Via the Internet, the women agree to swap homes for two weeks in December. Winslet arrives at Diaz's swanky L.A. digs, and quickly bonds with Jack Black's endearing soundtrack composer. Diaz arrives at Winslet's cozy Surrey cottage, and quickly bonds with Jude Law's endearing book editor. Winslet and Black are perfect for one another. Diaz and Law are perfect for one another. And, good Lord, does it take an eternity for these people to realize this!

At two hours and 20 minutes, *The Holiday* isn't just a romantic comedy. It's an *epic* romantic comedy, which wouldn't be bothersome if there were more happening in it. But aside from the women's romantic entanglements and a sweetly unnecessary subplot involving Eli Wallach as a retired screenwriter, there just isn't any *drama*

here - not even
comedic
drama. There are no major crises and no huge obstacles to be overcome; there aren't even many supporting characters to involve ourselves with. (Amazingly,
The Holiday
is a chick flick without even one salt-of-the-earth best friend for the stars to lean on.)

What there is, though, is talk. Lots and *lots* of talk. As the leading ladies pontificate on their romantic histories and the difficulty of maintaining a healthy relationship - with the men throwing in their occasional two cents, always saying exactly the right thing at exactly the right time - Meyers seems hell-bent on filling screen time with every single conversation she's ever had concerning the nature of love. And all the conversations she's ever
wanted
to have. And all the conversations her
friends
may have had or wanted to have. I love snappy dialogue as much as anyone, but what Meyers writes isn't dialogue; it's
speechifying
, and by
The Holiday
's end I wanted nothing more than an explosive action scene to take my mind off the incessant yakking. (Where's Mel when you really need him?)

In fairness, the cast does provide loads of charm, and since the movie isn't aiming to do much more than simply *be* charming, I guess you could call *The Holiday* a success. The naturally incandescent Winslet gets a nice rapport going with an appealingly squirrelly Black, while Diaz - whose incandescence is more manufactured than Winslet's - continues to secure audience empathy with her willingness (eagerness, even) to act the fool. Best of all, surprisingly, is Jude Law, more relaxed and engaging than he's been in years. The actors are terrific; I just wish they had better things to say, and ate up less of my time saying them. I've taken
actual
vacations that didn't feel as long as
The Holiday
.