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NORBIT

Eddie Murphy's latest latex comedy, *Norbit*, is an unusual mixture of abject stupidity and sheer genius. If you've seen the previews - and is there anyone left who hasn't? - you've pretty much gleaned the plot, which finds our nerdy, titular hero (Murphy) trapped in matrimonial hell with the punishing, frighteningly obese Rasputia (Murphy again), and yearning to win the heart of his one true love (Thandie Newton). From beginning to end, director Brian Robbins' movie is formulaic, repetitive, obvious, and not nearly as hysterical as it wants to be. It's also one of the few comedies of recent years to be touched with something approximating brilliance.

Even viewers who wind up hating *Norbit* - and, despite the film's *fait accompli* box-office success, I'm guessing that'll include quite a few of you - must concede that Rick Baker's makeup effects are extraordinary. When Murphy is in Rasputia drag, or when he's playing the ancient Asian Mr. Wong, you find yourself staring at the prosthetics in wonder, as you did in the *Nutty Professor* films - where on earth did the star *go*? (When Rasputia wore a micro-bikini to a water park, I barely heard a word that was said during the scene, hypnotized as I was by the totality of Murphy's guise; Baker, here, has created wholly realistic *cellulite*, for Pete's sake.) But look beyond the latex and you'll see that he didn't go *anywhere* - despite Baker's astonishing work, it's Murphy, and not the makeup artist, whose *Norbit* efforts can truly be called heroic.

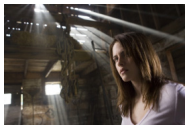
Many reviewers have expressed disappointment, if not outright hostility, toward the movie because it finds Murphy slumming in Wayans-brothers territory, and with its insistence on scoring laughs through disfiguring makeup and special-effects trickery, you could easily argue that *Norbit* is cut from the same cloth as *White Chicks* or *Little Man*. Yet unlike the Wayans, Murphy is actually an *actor*, and doesn't let the elaborate disguises do all his work for him.

Some comic performers - Peter Sellers and Alec Guinness spring to mind - never seem more relaxed or spontaneous than when completely hidden on-screen, and like them, Murphy uses his camouflage to explode from within; if you can tear yourself away from the *Norbit* prosthetics, watch Murphy's *eyes*, and you'll see that he's never merely going through the motions, and *never* steps out of character. The star, here, often gets laughs through the breakneck speed of his delivery, but it's when he slows down - digging deeply into Norbit's browbeaten soulfulness and Rasputia's self-centeredness - that he manages to *humanize* the film; under Murphy's control, stereotypes turn into engaging, even charming comic creations. (Murphy takes a lot of offensive sting out of the movie's pedestrian fat jokes by making Rasputia absolutely convinced of her own sexiness.)

It would be ridiculous to suggest that *Norbit* was any kind of *good* movie. (The two most overworked clichés in Hollywood are - and have always been - the "save the orphanage" plot and the finale that culminates with the disruption of a wedding, and *Norbit* incorporates *both*.) Yet it's filled with likable performers: Thandie Newton, forced to enact so much suffering in *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Crash*, exudes a blissful light spirit (and is a vision in pastels); Cuba Gooding Jr., despite a senseless role, reminds us what a quick-witted comedian he can be; Eddie Griffin and Katt Williams, who seem to be improvising their way through their scenes, are legitimately hilarious as sweet-tempered former pimps (named Pope Sweet Jesus and Lord Have Mercy, respectively). The movie is a bit of a train wreck, but at least the actors emerge unscathed, and none more so than Eddie Murphy. Many Academy Awards bloggers are currently predicting that *Norbit*'s juvenile antics will cost its star his presumed *Dreamgirls* Oscar. *I* hope it reminds voters just how freakin' good Murphy actually *is*.

HANNIBAL RISING

In the achingly unimaginative and humorless *Silence of the Lambs* prequel *Hannibal Rising*, we learn what it was that turned a sweet little boy into a vicious, cannibalistic madman: youthful exposure to Dirty Harry movies. Okay, that's a lie. But it may as well be true, as the storyline for novelist/screenwriter Thomas Harris' hopelessly lazy origin fable can be conveniently broken into two parts: (1) Lecter the Child watches bad guys eat his baby sister, and (2) Lecter the Young Man gets revenge on the bad guys who ate his baby sister. Director Peter Webber's *Hannibal Rising* is grimly, lugubriously serious, filled with unbearably stoic dialogue, and it leaves the ravishing Gong Li with nothing to do, but the central casting is what really kills it. Gaspard Ulliel, here, initially comes off as the fey French love child of Keanu Reeves and Chris Klein, and he morphs into something less creepy-crazy than just plain *weird*; by the time our hungry protagonist was enacting his ultimate revenge, it took all my strength not to giggle, because Ulliel's performance suggested that this young Hannibal wouldn't eventually turn into Anthony Hopkins, but rather Crispin Glover. All together now: *Eeeewww.*



THE MESSENGERS

The Messengers is typical, low-grade spook stuff, wherein a Chicago family moves into a haunted farmhouse in North Dakota, and the clan's moody teenage daughter (Kristen Stewart) is terrorized by apparitions that only she and her baby brother can see. However, in a fine surprise, the film's directors appear loaded with talent. Danny and Oxide Pang can't do much about the predictable nature of the thrills, or the cheesy dialogue, or the ridiculous finale, which sacrifices scares for a lengthy rehash of Jack Nicholson's slavering antics in *The Shining*

. Yet the brothers appear sensationally gifted at composition.

There's a sequence here, set in the house's hallway, that consists of nothing but Stewart holding her sibling in her arms while the house spirits sneak up behind them, and the Pangs' framing - with the camera teetering just over Stewart's shoulder, so that we can barely make out the approaching entities - is almost unbearably nerve-racking; in *The Messengers*, the Pangs frequently put you on edge, and then take you *over* the edge. They also do spectacular work with a marauding murder of crows and a collapsing flight of stairs, and their handling of the family's mute toddler (played by twins Evan and Theodore Turner) is exemplary; employing long takes, the Pangs give the kid(s) plenty of room to just *behave*, and the unsettling scenes with this child, hypnotized by the supernatural goings-on, bring to mind Spielberg's expert guidance of Cary Guffey in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

It's a little disappointing, though, that the young Turners wind up out-acting the rest of the cast. Stewart delivers a sincere but sadly uninteresting performance, Dylan McDermott and John Corbett vacillate between listlessness and hammy overkill, and Penelope Ann Miller, who plays the family matriarch, is unfailingly bad - her vapid line readings provide the movie's only laughs. Intense and impressive though their work often is in *The Messengers*, the Pang brothers - who have mostly worked in Hong Kong and Thailand - still have a ways to go in terms of dealing with American actors ... or, at least, with American actors old enough to *talk*.