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REIGN OVER ME

Even though I have yet to enjoy Adam Sandler in, well, *anything*, I applaud the comic's attempts to stretch beyond the mumbling, hostile, stunted-adolescent shtick he's employed in such comedies as *Click*, *50 First*

Dates,

and

Mr. Deeds

. I'd applaud them more if the films he chooses to stretch

in

-

Punch-Drunk Love, *Spanglish*

, and the current

Reign Over Me

- didn't wind up every bit as confused and unsatisfying as his comedies are.

In writer/director Mike Binder's buddy drama, Sandler plays Charlie Fineman, a former dentist whose wife and three daughters were among the 9/11 plane fatalities; in his grief, Charlie has cut himself off from society - his near-catatonic state is occasionally disrupted by bursts of Sandlerian anger - and it's up to his former college roommate, Alan (Don Cheadle), to reconnect Charlie to the world, and enliven his own staid, comfortable lifestyle in the process.

It's a purely schematic setup, but Binder hits upon some really strong dramatic conceits; I was

Arrested Development: "Reign Over Me," "Pride," "The Hills Have Eyes II," and "The Last Mimzy"

Written by Mike Schulz

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especially taken with how Charlie's Manhattan allies, including his landlady and lawyer, are deliberately *trying* to keep him disconnected from others - they're implicitly saying that Charlie, like the rest of New York, has been through *enough*, and has earned the right to be left alone.

Yet for every good idea in *Reign Over Me*, Binder includes about three bad ones. There are meaningless-or-worse subplots involving Liv Tyler as a kindly therapist and Saffron Burrows as a libidinous divorcée, and Charlie's post-traumatic behavior makes no psychological sense at all; he's sometimes prone to toddler-like tantrums, sometimes to horny-teenager jokiness, sometimes to collegiate slackerdom. Binder's script doesn't have Charlie reverting to a more innocent, pre-marriage-and-family state, as it seems to

want

to; it has him reverting to an

Adam Sandler

state.

And the hell of it is that Sandler is actually pretty good here. He's no Don Cheadle - an actor with almost limitless charisma and a gift for making his every line of dialogue sound fresh - but he gives as close to an *honest* performance as I've yet seen from him; Sandler pulls off his tearful monologues with impressive ache, and comes up with bits of business that feel spontaneous yet exactly right for the moment. (At the end of a tirade against his in-laws, Sandler suddenly kisses Melinda Dillon on the cheek before walking away, and her reaction suggests that the gesture was improvised.)

Reign Over Me probably contains Sandler's finest screen work yet, but the film itself can't stop vacillating between honest sentiment and maddening sitcom contrivance, and based on the screening I attended, the comedian's base isn't making the experience any easier to sit through; two guys in the front row roared so hard at his every Sandlerism that it felt as if I was witnessing

The Waterboy 2. (The biggest laughs came when Sandler repeatedly called Cheadle "faggot.") Their merriment reminded me of the inappropriate cackling that greeted Will Ferrell's thoughtful performance in the recent

Fiction,

Stranger Than

and it

made me wonder: With fans like these, why should comedians even

bother

stretching?

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PRIDE

Unless it's the first Inspirational Sports Drama you've ever seen, almost nothing that happens in *Pride* will come as a surprise. Sunu Gonera's true-life tale, which concerns a team of Philadelphia-based, African-American swimmers in 1974, follows the Inspirational Sports Drama playbook so faithfully that it could almost be a *parody* of said films. (Was it really necessary to give the team's shy, boyish participant a cutesy stutter?) So rather than bore you with the particulars, let me just say that Terrence Howard gives an expectedly heartfelt performance as the team's coach, Bernie Mac plays the Burgess Meredith role with dynamic authority, and, thankfully, Gonera has a terrifically *cinematic* sport at hand; the underwater shots, during the Big Game sequence especially, are beautiful. And every once in a while, there *will* be an unexpected development. As *Pride* concerns swimmers, I waited for the inevitable moment in the last half hour when an athlete, during laps, conks his head on the interior wall of the pool and the audience collectively sucks in its breath. That scene happens here, but it happens in the *first* half hour. Who says that originality in Hollywood is dead?



THE HILLS HAVE EYES II

It was probably too much to hope that this sequel to Alexandre Aja's horror remake would match its forbear in terms of wit and directorial finesse; last spring's *Hills* was so smartly

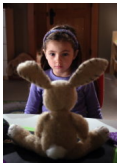
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designed, and so legitimately terrifying, that it may be the strongest movie of its type released this decade. But certainly Wes Craven and company noticed the satiric possibilities inherent in this follow-up? Instead of preying on a vacationing family in an abandoned nuclear-testing ground, this time the marauding mutants have access to soldiers in the National Guard, and with this well-armed mini-militia trying to pinpoint - and obliterate - the creatures while they zip in and out of mountainside caves, the movie immediately suggests an even more nightmarish version of Afghanistan.

However, it quickly becomes clear that director Martin Weisz and writers Wes and Jonathan Craven don't have satire (or anything else, really) on their minds. Theoretically, the audience should be put in the position of either cheering our heroic soldiers' battle or - more subversively - hoping to see them get picked off in unspeakable ways, yet with all of the expected military tropes in place (yes, the Cravens remembered to include a black sergeant who barks orders at his troops) and the dialogue just one long variant on "Let's get the f--- out of here!", the film contents itself with being just another excessively gruesome, lazily structured, and deeply unimaginative torture flick. Do these people realize just how badly they dropped the ball? The hills may have eyes, but it doesn't appear that the *filmmakers* do. Brains either, for that matter.



THE LAST MIMZY

Toward the end of the family fantasy *The Last Mimzy*, Michael Clarke Duncan, as a high-level government official, surveys the odd happenings around him and says, "I have no idea what's going on here." For the first and potentially only time in my life, I feel exactly like Michael Clarke Duncan, but the movie is pretty entertaining anyway. A bizarre pre-teen sci-fi excursion with elements of Tibetan Buddhism, Bob Shaye's adventure is a head-scratching amalgam of *E.T.*, *A.I.*, and

Donnie Darko

, yet it has a fair degree of charm, and it certainly captured the interest of its target audience; considering the film's nutso metaphysics, Saturday afternoon's packed crowd of youngsters remained remarkably attentive. With its playful spirit and enjoyably offbeat performances by Rainn Wilson and Kathryn Hahn,

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The Last Mimzy

may be strange, but it's

winningly

strange, and its heart is definitely in the right place; like the terrific

Bridge to Terabithia,

the movie's narrative deficiencies are made moot through sincerity and true invention. I don't know whether to be cheered or bummed that, these days, kids seem to be getting a better deal at the cineplex than we grown-ups are.