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HOSTEL: PART II

(Spoiler Alert: If it matters, details of Hostel: Part II's plot will - sorry - spill out.)

Upon returning to the office after seeing *Hostel: Part II*, my editor asked me what I thought of Eli Roth's horror sequel, and my immediate reply was, "Oh, it's crap." There was no anger or disappointment in my tone; having intensely disliked the first

Hostel

, I expected its follow-up to be awful, and it

was

awful. Yet four days after viewing the movie, I still can't get it out of my head, and I'm forced to admit that while my initial, gut response may have been honest, it wasn't entirely fair.

Is *Hostel: Part II* crap? Probably. The film falls apart long before its finale, and Roth's scare-flick style is almost shockingly primitive - we spend half the film waiting for characters to be tortured, and the other half

watching them be tortured. But is it *completely* worthless? No. The movie has a fair degree of wit and a reasonably terrific 45-minute opener, and it would be hard to argue that Roth doesn't know what he's doing; I may have been revolted by

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Written by Mike Schulz
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Hostel: Part II

, but that's sort of the
point

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and as much as I might like to, I can't completely disregard the film with a simple "Oh, it's crap."

Like Rob Zombie, whose films also possess a veneer of seemingly artless depravity, Eli Roth has no compunction about killing off characters you don't necessarily want to see killed. Roth, however, ups the ante by eliminating - and in unspeakable ways - characters you really

like

. After

Hostel: Part II

's prelude, in which Roth dispatches the sole survivor of the original film (and in a completely unconvincing manner), we're introduced to the sequel's heroines: Beth (Lauren German), Whitney (Bijou Phillips), and Lorna (Heather Matarazzo). Before the inevitable kidnapping and torture commences, the movie finds them happily vacationing in eastern Europe, and during these introductory scenes I found myself having the most unexpected reaction to an Eli Roth horror movie: I was smiling. A

lot

.

Part of the reason *Hostel: Part II* is so likable in its early scenes is that Roth, smartly, has cast several intensely likable *performers*. Lauren German is new to me, but Bijou Phillips' frisky, unaffected comic technique proved endearing in

The Door in the Floor

and, most memorably,

Almost Famous

(if Kate Hudson was a cupcake, Phillips was a gumdrop), and Heather Matarazzo is a charmingly eccentric original; she makes a distinct, delightful style out of utter gawkiness.

Yet Roth's cleverness extends beyond the casting. In the original film's sole nod to wit, the nemeses in the *Hostel* movies turned out to be *über*-rich globe-trotters (of both sexes) who would pay - and pay handsomely - for the privilege of eviscerating our young protagonists. Here, the writer/director delivers a wickedly subversive montage showing just how this maniacal "business" is transacted: through Blackberrys and PCs, as photos of the unsuspecting youths are swapped, bidding commences, and their price tags soar higher and higher. Murder, in the

Hostel

films, is as commonplace, and as convenient, as eBay. (It's a rather ingenious, not altogether unbelievable conceit.)

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And then we meet the two Americans who've secured a winning bid for Beth and Whitney: Todd and Stuart, two suburbanites who would appear more comfortable with golf clubs in hand than rusty scalpels. (Underscoring his point, Roth has cast Richard Burgi and Roger Bart in the roles - two actors from TV's *Desperate Housewives*.) Though it's unclear whether they're brothers or best friends, the two men bicker and bitch incessantly - they seem to be continuing a running argument they've had since childhood - and during one of their more amusing encounters ("Now why'd you have to go and bring up the gonorrhea ... ?"), I found myself not only liking the heroines, but kinda liking the villains, too.

This, I'm guessing, is just what Roth wants, and why some have greeted *Hostel: Part II* with a virulent hatred bordering on disgust; certainly it accounted for

my

knee-jerk reaction to the film. I was enjoying her performance so much that I didn't

want

to see Matarazzo dangling naked, screaming, and having her blood spattered on the nude woman lying beneath her. I didn't

want

to see the similarly anguished Phillips being imperiled - and, eventually, disfigured - by a buzz-saw to the face. I didn't

want

to see the mild-mannered Stuart shuck off his nice-guy-ness to embrace his inner psychopath.

And I certainly didn't want the pain, dismemberment, and unrelenting blood-letting of both heroines

and

villains to be presented with such zeal, as if, after spending half of the film getting us to empathize with his characters, Roth couldn't wait to

trash

all that goodwill.

But as repelled as I am by the results, I gotta admit: The movie *works*. Its narrative doesn't really allow for the building of tension, yet Roth delivers the

outré

gross-outs with undeniable skill, and considering how frequently I rail against horror movies wherein you don't feel anything for the people on-screen, it seems disingenuous to criticize one that makes you care too

much.

Eli Roth doesn't appear to possess Rob Zombie's filmmaking savvy, or share his deliriously macabre sense of humor; where Zombie's violence makes you alternately gasp and laugh, Roth's, more often than not, just make you want to avert your eyes. But while Roth hasn't quite found his tone yet,

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indicates that he's certainly on his
way

to finding it, and while I never, ever want to see the movie again, I have to admit that I'm actually looking forward to whatever horrors Roth plans to upset me with next.

Crap

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FANTASTIC FOUR: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER

Considering that most action-packed summer blockbusters boast a running length that easily exceeds two hours - to say nothing of the latest *Pirates* vehicle, which was closer to *three* - I was delighted to learn that

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer

would clock in at a crisp 90 minutes. Unfortunately, it seemed to last about five times that long.

As one of the few who actually

liked

the first film's insouciance and slapdash, throwaway quality, I'm probably getting exactly what I deserve with this follow-up: more goofball humor (though less funny), more middling effects (though less imaginative), and more of the sense that there's absolutely nothing at stake in this franchise - which wouldn't be a big deal if the movie's

plot didn't concern the imminent destruction of the planet. Every once in a while, director Tim Story's needless and half-assed sequel boasts a clever one-liner; I liked it when a crisis arose and Chris Evans' Human Torch, unwilling to burn the tuxedo he was wearing, delayed his heroics by whining, "This is

Dolce

... !" But for most of its length,

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer

is a tedious, visually underwhelming offering, suffused with lame performances and even lamer dialogue - a disappointment only for the five or six of us who weren't disappointed with the *original*

.