

Our Father, Who Art in "Evan": "Evan Almighty" and "1408"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 27 June 2007 02:08

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EVAN ALMIGHTY

Thank God for lowered expectations.

I adore Steve Carell, and so I was initially jazzed about *Evan Almighty*, as director Tom Shadyac's sequel was a vehicle for the comic who handily stole 2003's

Bruce Almighty

away from hard-working star Jim Carrey. Yet after I saw the trailer, my excitement quickly turned into dread. Not only did the three-minute preview appear to give away every *second*

of

the movie - it showed the climactic flood approaching, for Pete's sake! - but the sight of a gray-bearded, robe-attired Carell looking benevolent while surround by all those

cu-u-u-ute

animals instantly set off my gag reflex; watching brilliant comedians sell out in witless kiddie flicks is to be expected, yet I was praying that it wouldn't happen with Carell.

(At least, I was praying that it wouldn't happen

again

- does anyone else recall the actor's involvement in the 2004 atrocity

Sleepover

?)

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But then came the kicker: Not only was *Evan Almighty* designed as a children's entertainment, but as a *non-secular* children's entertainment. (Op-ed pieces began popping up as to whether the mass audience would embrace a summer blockbuster with religious overtones.) Non-secular family fare has its place, of course. But the VeggieTales excepted, works in this genre are rarely a load of laughs, and considering that *Bruce Almighty*'s biggest guffaw came from Carrey shouting the f-word on live television - to say nothing of Bruce using his miraculous powers to increase the size of Jennifer Aniston's breasts - turning its follow-up into a film you could take the whole congregation to seemed more than a tad incongruous.

So it was with a heavy heart that I caught an opening-day screening of *Evan Almighty*. And you know something? It ain't all bad.

At least, it ain't all bad if you take it for what it is: the most visually extravagant - and, with its reported \$180 million price tag, most *expensive* - Sunday-school lesson in the history of motion pictures. Once you accept that there *won't be* any storyline surprises, and that Steve Carell *will* ditch his fantastically smarmy *Bruce Almighty* character for a kinder, gentler version, *Evan Almighty* is unexpectedly easy to sit through. There are just enough clever touches, and clever performers, to sustain your interest, and while \$180 million may be an obscene amount to spend, you can't say the money isn't on the screen - the scenes featuring all those two-by-two animals, and that climactic flooding, actually *are* as epic as you hope they'll be.

Lord knows the film doesn't transcend its family-flick trappings. The characters all fit snugly into the categories of "good" and "evil" - with a cartoonish John Goodman embodying the latter - while Evan's family members, including a poorly used Lauren Graham as his wife, barely count as characters at all. (The couple is given three sons without a personality between them.) The pratfalls, which are borderline funny the first few times, are less so on the 25th and 26th go-rounds. John Debney's unbearably treacly score begins whining at the slightest provocation. And there are a *lot* of jokes about poop.

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Yet as we watch Evan's journey from freshman congressman to bona fide ark-builder - oh, I'm sorry... you didn't require a *plot synopsis*, did you? - we're treated to some welcome grace notes. John Michael Higgins, Wanda Sykes, Jonah Hill, and the invaluable Molly Shannon all show up, giving their roles more unforced eccentricity than they merit, and not a shred less than they *require*. (A nice non-secular touch: Shannon's

untrustworthy realtor is named Eve Adams. An even

nicer

touch: Graham's character is named Joan, as in "... of Ark.") The Judeo-Christian ethics espoused feel neither tangential to the story nor overwhelm it; kids can enjoy the film without even realizing it's Good For Them. And Carell, despite seeming to recede further and further into his beard as the climax looms, can still wring laughs through inflection alone. (Which, considering his dialogue here, is an incredibly useful gift.)

Best of all, Morgan Freeman returns as the Almighty, and his presence here is proof that God exists even in middling kiddie entertainments. He's not around as often as you'd hope, but Freeman lends *Evan Almighty* exactly the level of gravitas it needs - a scene of him discussing the story of the Ark with Graham, while simplistic, is quite sweet - and when he lets loose with a big-hearted cackle, the actor gets everyone in the auditorium to giggle right along with him. You listen to that boisterous laugh and think: This is what Heaven must

sound

like.



1408

Michael Håfström's *1408*, which is based on a short story by Stephen King, is a most unusual modern horror movie, because even though it craps out in the final reels - as nearly every modern horror movie seems to - you don't leave feeling disappointed; you've had so much fun during the first 70 minutes that you *forgive* its lack of a satisfying final 20.

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The film finds struggling author Mike Enslin (John Cusack) determined to debunk rumors of a haunted hotel room during an overnight stay - previous guests, *when* they've survived, tend to last less than an hour

and for most of

1408

's length, the movie a giggly, nerve-racking good time. The sound effects and Gabriel Yared's hushed, suggestive score are particularly fine, and Håfström, with his restless camera, pulls off some spectacular creep-outs (and makes it impossible to ever again listen to the Carpenters' "We've Only Just Begun" without shuddering). Samuel L. Jackson appears as the hotel manager, and delivers his "beware the evil in room 1408" warnings with such understated brio that you want to applaud. And cannily, the filmmakers establish Enslin as a smug jackass from the outset, so all of his eventual, nightmarish encounters are laced with comedy; you

want

to see this sarcastic, self-important prick taken down a peg or two. Which is where John Cusack's casting proves essential, and even inspired.

A friend recently told me that he can no longer abide Cusack because whenever he watches him, all he sees is an actor acting - he never *believes* him. It's a point that's hard to argue with; I doubt we've ever seen an emotionally naked Cusack performance (we've come close in

Say Anything...

and

High Fidelity

), and I'm not sure we ever will.

But I find the performer's cagey inscrutability - his apparent *unwillingness* to open up and become one with a character - fascinating, and it seems to serve him especially well here. As Enslin's confidence and sanity begins to dribble away, the

faux

coolness that Cusack so readily projects dribbles away, too, and as the haunted hotel room begins to make its attacks awfully

personal

, the actor appears legitimately shaken and mentally frayed - part of

1408

's thrill lies in watching Cusack the

performer

get roughed up a bit. He may be "only" acting here, but it's very, very

good

acting, and the role gives him a broader range of expression than he usually grants himself.

After more than two decades on-screen, Cusack may finally be in the process of revealing his soul. Movies may just have to

scare

it out of him.