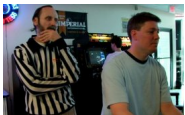


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THE KING OF KONG: A FISTFUL OF QUARTERS

Well before Seth Gordon's documentary *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters* was released (in *other marke*ts) six weeks ago, the director/editor had also been tapped by New Line Cinema to remake it as a more traditionally crowd-pleasing Hollywood narrative. Having now seen Gordon's hugely enjoyable doc, I can barely fathom a more redundant film concept.

The King of Kong, which chronicles a tense yet mostly theoretical rivalry between Donkey Kong champions Billy Mitchell (the long-reigning, arrogant one) and Steve Wiebe (the long-suffering, sensitive one), is less a triumph-of-the-underdog story than a will-he-or-*won't*-he-triumph?-of-the-underdog story, and it's a fantastic amount of fun. The video-game masters - and a hysterical series of gaming gurus, moles, and sycophants - are fascinating, engaging figures, and the film features more than a dozen scenes of magnificent comedic turmoil. (I particularly relished the first time we see Mitchell and Wiebe in the same frame - a tense, giddily unbearable moment.) By its climax, this documentary has practically turned into a comedy *thriller*; watching it, you're happily itchy to see how its true story will end.

Game Faces: "The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters," October 3 and 4 at the Bijou Theatre

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 03 October 2007 02:23

It's a sensationally effective movie. It's also a blatantly manipulative one; Gordon never deviates from his plot-goosing Billy-is-the-devil, Steve-is-an-angel assertion, and stacks the deck way too heavily in Steve's favor. (As the film nears its climax, nearly everything Mitchell says and does is designed to make you hiss.) Yet the reason the manipulation isn't

offensive

is that it's used in the service of comedy that, surprisingly, doesn't feel mean-spirited - even Mitchell doesn't come off all

that

bad in it - and although

The King of Kong

's construction often indicates otherwise, the director is alert to his subjects' natural good humor, and elicits honest laughs just by letting the camera linger on his interviewees a little longer than you'd expect. Those addressing the camera, as with the characters on TV's

The Office

, elicit good-natured laughs merely by being

themselves

.

It's easy to imagine a Hollywood remake of the movie being amusing, and even touching. But *The King of Kong*

, as is, is just as entertaining, gripping, and, yes, crowd-pleasing - in that *good*

way - as the best of big-screen blockbusters. (The audience I was in applauded at the end.)

Instead of spending money on what is almost predestined to be a typically bloated, multi-million-dollar Hollywood comedy, I'm guessing that New Line could have saved a bunch of dough - and reaped a considerable profit - just by giving

this

version a wider release and a decent advertising budget.