

Neither Naughty Nor Nice: "Fred Claus" and "Lions for Lambs"

Written by Mike Schulz

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FRED CLAUS

As crass, demeaning, insufferable holiday-themed comedies go, *Fred Claus* is a little bit better than *The Santa*

Clause 3, *Deck the Halls*, *Surviving Christmas*,

and

Christmas with the Kranks

. (This faint praise might also extend to examples released before 2004, but I've succeeded in blocking those titles from memory.) It's also a little bit worse than 80 percent of the movies I've seen this year.

By now, we all know what to expect from these over-produced, under-imagined ventures: a gross celebration of materialism in the guise of humanism; an embarrassing, unearned sentimentality that would make Dickens choke on his figgy pudding; and a miserable waste of gifted performers - in *Fred Claus'* case, *really* gifted performers, as the cast includes Vince Vaughn, Paul Giamatti, Kevin Spacey, Miranda Richardson, Rachel Weisz, Kathy Bates, John Michael Higgins, Elizabeth Banks, and Chris "Ludacris" Bridges. (My

lord

, movies of this ilk must pay well.) Yet while many of the aforementioned actors lend some wit to the proceedings, David Dobkin's slapstick, with its screenplay by Dan Fogelman, is a pernicious waste of time, money, and talent, and is all the more depressing for completely ignoring the elements that may intrigue us most.

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The film's high-concept premise finds Vaughn, as the jealous older brother to Giamatti's Kris Kringle, forced to spend the holidays making toys in Santa's workshop. You may be wondering how the film works around its incongruity of Vaughn appearing decades, if not centuries, younger than his jolly-old-elf sibling. You'll still be wondering during the closing credits. Some half-hearted narration tells us that, in this make-believe universe, once Nicholas is christened a saint, his entire family stops aging. But beyond being a ridiculous narrative shortcut, it's a cheat, as it leads to a string of questions *Fred Claus* has no interest in addressing. If the aging process has indeed been halted, why does Santa - who complains of his annual hair-whitening - look older than his parents? What did Vaughn's hyper-active hustler do in the hundreds of years between the film's prelude and its present-day scenes? Where does

Mrs.

Claus fit into all of this? (Can you become immortal by marriage?)

I'd be more willing to let go of this central idiocy if the rest of the storytelling was *less* idiotic, but *Fred Claus*

proves to be an almost pathological blend of unexplained ideas and aborted ones. Spacey, reprising his Lex Luthor routine, shows up as a heartless bureaucrat hell-bent on shutting down Santa's factory. From which head office, exactly, was this character sent? God's? We're led to expect fireworks when Vaughn reconnects with his mother (Bates), and when Weisz, as his meter-maid girlfriend, discovers his lineage. Why do both events take place

off-camera

? Every time a plot strand piques your interest here, it's blithely discarded; the filmmakers seem to be counting on an average attention span of four seconds.

Fittingly, *Fred Claus* occasionally works for about four seconds at a time; Giamatti finds more comic shadings in the phrase "Ho ho ho" than you'd ever think possible, and Vaughn delivers a few of his patented, entertainingly over-caffeinated rants that zip by so quickly you barely notice that the words oftentimes don't make grammatical sense. Yet while

Claus

is awful for many reasons - the beyond-anemic cinematography, the distracting and unappealing CGI superimposition of Higgins' and Ludacris' heads on diminutive bodies - its biggest failing lies in turning its vibrantly snarky leading man into a frequently moist-eyed puddle of holiday goo. (Was it

really

necessary to give him an orphaned black child in need of a father figure?) Since his breakthrough role in

Swingers

11 years ago, Vince Vaughn, like many of us, has put on weight.

Fred Claus

, though, is the first movie to succeed in making the actor appear downright flabby.

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LIONS FOR LAMBS

It's been a long, long time since Tom Cruise has been as well-cast as he is in *Lions for Lambs*. In director Robert Redford's and screenwriter Matthew Michael Carnahan's talky, reasonably involving trifecta of shame-based Iraq War meditations, one-third of the movie is dedicated to a college professor (Redford) trying to instill participatory fervor in a slacker student (Andrew Garfield), and one-third is devoted to two of the prof's former charges (Derek Luke and Michael Peña), whose patriotism has led to their entrapment in Afghanistan. Neither segment adds up to much more than a compendium of politically correct talking points, but thankfully, there's a *third* third, in which Cruise's Republican senator reveals strategies, assigns blame, and matches wits with Meryl Streep's investigative journalist. In acting terms, Streep mops the floor with him - her gradual build-up of outrage is all the more effective for being mostly unspoken - but Cruise, to his enormous credit, holds his own. The actor's earnest, cocksure fraudulence, qualities that seriously undermine his work in other roles, is exactly right for this mealy-mouthed charmer; he's no more convincing than he was arguing antidepressants with Matt Lauer, but in *Lions for Lambs*, happily, he's not *meant* to be.