

## Thanksgiving Leftovers: "August Rush," "This Christmas," "Hitman," and "Awake"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 05 December 2007 02:30

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### **AUGUST RUSH**

There's a scene in the tear-jerker *August Rush* in which the titular musical prodigy (Freddie Highmore) and a friendly Irish rocker (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) - unaware that they're father and son - engage in a happy bit of dueling guitars in Central Park, their matching grins widening as the improvised strumming reaches its climax. It's a great moment, and I mention it because it's the only one in the film that I didn't find excruciating.

Kirsten Sheridan's mush-brained fairy tale, with its beatific, New Age awe at the glorious alignment of the universe (or something) and its actors forced into varying states of wistful melancholy, plays like an endless pajama party at John Tesh's house, and aside from that guitar sequence and the staggering gospel vocals of little Jamia Simone Nash, my only entertainment stemmed from determining which of *August Rush's* elements was the most irritating. The use of Highmore's vacant expression to suggest deep feeling, even though this somnolent urchin suggests a tyke who needs parenting less than mood stimulants? The insert shots of its young star's guitar- and piano-playing, featuring hands that obviously belong to a man (or men) decades older? The "magical" star-crossed romance between Meyers and Keri Russell, whose love-at-first-sight encounter is like witnessing the union of Dull and Duller? The casting of Robin Williams as an eccentric - and, being Williams, unbearable - New York Fagin? (Not for nothing, but isn't it a little soon after

*License to Wed*

for the actor to again be holing up with pre-pubescent?) The eye-rollingly earnest

*August Rush*

seems designed to make certain audience members sigh and say, "They just don't make them like that anymore." To which some of us simply reply, "Thank God."



### **THIS CHRISTMAS**

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Right before the closing credits to writer/director Preston A. Whitemore II's comedic soap opera *This Christmas*

, the film's cast is seen laughing and dancing and mugging for the camera, and there's more inspiration and joy in these five minutes than in

*August Rush*

's 100. The film is one of those predictably sentimental offerings in which a large family gathers for the holidays, nurses old resentments, flirts with new ones, and - with occasional pauses for the requisite slapstick - inevitably solves all of their problems in just under two hours. But for what it is,

*This Christmas*

is performed marvelously well; Delroy Lindo, Loretta Devine, Regina King, Sharon Leal, Idris Elba, Chris Brown, and numerous others are wholly believable and unflinching enjoyable, and help prove that a sincere movie doesn't necessarily have to be a sickly one.



**HITMAN**

Based on a video-game that, though I've never played it, has to be at least 50 times more enjoyable than its cinematic spin-off, *Hitman* finds Timothy Olyphant playing a bad-ass assassin a mere five months after playing a bad-ass terrorist in

*Live Free or Die Hard*

. Are casting directors - and audiences - just so dazed by Olyphant's handsomeness that they don't notice how laughably

*wrong*

he is for these roles? He has that charismatic-dead-eyed-stare thing down cold, but every time the actor opens his mouth, he's a joke; whenever Olyphant makes tough-guy pronouncements in that anesthetized monotone of his, I'm torn between wanting to giggle and wanting to curl up and nap. (Why on earth doesn't he get cast in more comedies, where he's actually displayed considerable charm?) To be fair, Brando himself wouldn't have been able to make Xavier Gens' incoherent, aching repetitive shoot-'em-up palatable;

*Lost*

's Henry Ian Cusick shows up as a twitchy, drug-addled Russian gun nut in leather pajamas, and

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*Hitman*

is

*still*

boring as hell.



### **AWAKE**

Granted, Joby Harold's medical thriller *Awake* doesn't really fall under the "Thanksgiving Leftovers" blanket, as it just opened this past weekend, but chances are still good that it'll have left multiplexes before that uneaten turkey and cranberry sauce have left your fridge. Not that this is necessarily the movie's *fault*; *Awake* is ludicrous, but it isn't wholly uninteresting. There are a fair number of narrative surprises, and the film benefits hugely from its shrewdly employed supporting actors - at first, Jessica Alba, Lena Olin, Terrence Howard, Christopher McDonald, and Arliss Howard appear to be playing exactly the character types they usually do, and gradually, the movie subverts your expectations about each and every one of them. (Only Fisher Stevens, looking dangerously thin, is typecast.)

Yet *Awake* is already suffering the same box-office fate as this spring's far superior *The Invisible*, partly, I'm guessing, because it's much the same movie - here, a billionaire's son (Hayden Christensen), finding himself mysteriously alert during an open-heart transplant, must find a way to prevent his own murder - and mostly because it's being marketed exactly the same way: incorrectly. The previews are promoting the film as a torture-porn extravaganza when it's really just a moderately clever, albeit ridiculously contrived and plot-hole-ridden, goof; the movie is only violent if you consider surgery itself an act of violence.

*Awake*

isn't worth seeing, but it certainly deserves better than the hostile reaction it's likely to get from the misled audiences who are eagerly anticipating

*Saw V: The Malpractice Suit*

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