

Death Wishes: "The Bucket List," "The Kite Runner," and "First Sunday"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 16 January 2008 02:18



THE BUCKET LIST

I can't begin to describe how much I was looking forward to making fun of *The Bucket List*. A Rob Reiner-directed dramedy about two squabbling terminal-cancer patients - Jack Nicholson, cackling and flexing his eyebrows, and Morgan Freeman, providing soothing, pithy bromides and the inevitable voice-over narration - who gradually become friends and live out their final days skydiving and race-car driving and scaling the pyramids Was there any way this *wouldn't* be a syrupy disaster of epic proportions?

It turns out that yes, there *was* a way: Nicholson and Freeman could actually take their roles in this depressingly shameless and manipulative film *seriously*.

The Bucket List, with its regrettable script by Justin Zackham, is every bit the laugh-and-cry pander-fest its previews promised, and there's plenty about the movie that deserves derisive titters; the setup, which finds Nicholson's crass billionaire forced to share a room with Freeman's salt-of-the-earth mechanic, is reason enough to chortle, but the glaringly fraudulent CGI shots of the guys fulfilling their last-wish fantasies in "Egypt" and "Africa" and "Hong Kong" are no less ridiculous. What's absolutely unexpected about the film, though, is just how much gravitas and honest emotion its stars lend to it, despite having played variants on these characters dozens - hundreds? - of times before.

Most of the film finds Nicholson doing his well-honed Irascible Jack thing, but he has a few moments - especially when his character is undergoing chemotherapy treatments - when you're reminded what a fine actor he can be when he puts his mind to it; while subtlety has never been a weapon in the Nicholson's arsenal, he gives an impressively well-considered portrayal of a lonely man using anger to ward off fear. And it's a thrill to watch Freeman (occasionally) shuck off his courtly-sage persona and let loose with some heated indignation and fury, and the scene that finds him propositioned by a beautiful woman at a bar features what is easily his most affecting acting since *Million Dollar Baby*; in less than 60 seconds, Freeman's eyes do a better job of storytelling than Zackham does in 95 minutes. T

he Bucket List

is a contrived, cloying picture, but under Nicholson's and Freeman's watch, at least it isn't an

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embarrassing one.



THE KITE RUNNER

Based on those insufferable trailers, I was dreading *The Bucket List*, but that poster for *The Kite Runner*

was just as off-putting: the image of two little Afghani boys, their arms around each other's shoulders, and a multi-hued kite ascending to heaven, with the lump-in-the-throat tagline: "There is a way to be good again." (Check, please.) Happily, the movie is better than its advertising, even though Marc Forster's adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's much-loved best-seller doesn't provide much visual interest, and the performances rarely rise above adequate, and the Escape-from-the-Taliban action-flick climax is a true credibility-strainer. Still, the director and screenwriter David Benioff have hold of a strong, touching storyline and present Hosseini's tale of childhood guilt and adult penance with sincerity, focus, and un-showy grace. It's the sort of solid, engaging, unexceptional drama that leaves you thinking, "That was pretty good," and all but vanishes from memory before the end of the drive home.



FIRST SUNDAY

Writer/director David E. Talbert's *First Sunday* is, for two-thirds of its running length, a raucous farce about a pair of ne'er-do-wells (Ice Cube and Tracy Morgan) who decide to rob their neighborhood church, and maybe I'm just being overly sensitive, but I probably would've laughed at the movie harder if Ice Cube didn't keep shoving a loaded gun into the parishioners' faces. It turns out, though, that Talbert doesn't necessarily

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want

us to be laughing. By the film's end, what began as a slapdash but moderately agreeable heist comedy has (d)evolved into a slapdash and somewhat less agreeable inner-city drama, complete with lectures on decaying moral values, homilies on the power of forgiveness, and the discomfoting sight of Tracy Morgan - completely without irony - weeping because no one threw him a birthday party as a child.

For a movie that espouses faith and regular church attendance, *First Sunday* is an unholy mess; maudlin detours between Cube and his character's pubescent son sit side-by-side with queasy slapstick involving Morgan's Swedish massage from a transvestite, and it all climaxes with one of the most protracted and witless courtroom scenes of the past several years.

There are, however, pleasures to be had. When he's not overindulging in platitudes and sentiment, Talbert writes some quick, snappy dialogue - the angry flirtation between Cube and Malinda Williams is especially sharp - and he's assembled a fantastic cast: Regina Hall, Chi McBride, Clifton Powell, Nicholas Turturro, and the remarkable Loretta Devine and Olivia Cole. Best of all is Katt Williams as the church's spirited, prissy choir director; only about a third of his lines are funny, but damned if the actor's muted, hilariously put-upon delivery doesn't snag a laugh from nearly every one of them. Williams was also pretty great in *The Perfect Holiday* and *Norbit*

, but I can't wait to see what he eventually does in a

good
movie.