

Fun in the Oven: "Baby Mama," "The Forbidden Kingdom," and "Deception"

Written by Mike Schulz

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BABY MAMA

Despite its sunny, friendly veneer, there's a rather scrappy little war being waged within writer/director Michael McCullers' *Baby Mama* - one between a lighthearted, pleasant sitcom and a sharper, smarter, more cynical sitcom. (*Tw*
o and a Half Men

versus

30 Rock

, as it were.) The former wins, and we could have predicted as much, but the best parts of this engaging buddy flick suggest the truly sparkling comedy it *might*

have been, if only it weren't so eager to be ... well, lighthearted and pleasant.

In traditional odd-couple (and *Odd Couple*) fashion, the film pairs Tina Fey, as an unhappily childless health-food executive, and Amy Poehler, as a happily tactless surrogate mother, and the performers make for a joyously combative, effortlessly entertaining team. Fey's spiky sarcasm finds a perfect buffer in Poehler's dazed loopiness, and whenever the duo has a scene that's about nothing more than the actresses' chemistry - as when Fey tries to coax an oversized pre-natal vitamin down Poehler's throat - *B*

aby Mama

is a giddy riot.

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They're so appealing, in truth, that none of the movie's supporting buffoons quite manages to steal the movie away from them, but it's a kick watching them try: Steve Martin, dripping with self-satisfaction, as Fey's New Age-y boss; Sigourney Weaver, spectacularly condescending as a way-fertile surrogate-service entrepreneur; Dax Shepard as a hulking teddy bear with an appropriately cotton-filled brain. *Baby Mama* is brimming with actors who hit their comic marks and promptly vanish, and McCullers gives them plenty of meaty, terrifically biting one-liners.

And then, as Fey's love interest, there's Greg Kinnear. Of *course* there's Greg Kinnear - if you need a decent, unthreatening male of a certain age waiting in your romantic-comedy wings, you call Greg *first*. There's nothing much wrong with the actor's performance, but his presence is symptomatic of everything that's underwhelming about McCullers' movie; Kinnear, here, is affable, unsurprising, and more than a little bland, qualities frequently shared with the film, with its soothing sitcom rhythms and stagnant composition. It'd be churlish to bitch too hard about *Baby Mama*, as it's oftentimes really funny, and easily better than three-fourths of what's in current release. But we can already see Tina Fey and Amy Poehler on TV every week; it feels redundant to see them on TV at the multiplex.



THE FORBIDDEN KINGDOM

For a martial-arts take-off on *The Wizard of Oz* - to say nothing of one featuring Jackie Chan as the Scarecrow (*and the Wizard*) and Jet Li as the Tin Man (*and a flying monkey*) - *The Forbidden Kingdom* should be a lot more enjoyable than it actually is.

Michael Angarano, looking like a buff, albeit slightly goofy Edward Norton, plays a modern-day Boston teen who's transported to an ancient Chinese kingdom, where, with the help of a

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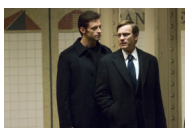
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drunken immortal (Chan) and a noble monk (Li), he must return a magical staff to the deposed Monkey King while evading an evil witch (Li Bing Bing) and warlord (Collin Chou). At least, that's the nutshell version of this unnecessarily convoluted film, which dies several slow deaths in between its aerial maneuvers and ground-level ass-kickings; director Rob Minkoff's pacing becomes turgid whenever the script imparts exposition and fortune-cookie banalities, which, sad to say, is about 70 percent of the time.

Unexpectedly, however, the fights themselves aren't much livelier. Some of the choreography is stunning, but instead of wham-bam kineticism, Minkoff appears to favor slow-motion awe, and watching Chan and Li - who are like special effects unto themselves - bust heads and backs at half-speed, especially in the unfortunately lethargic climax, seems a waste of their gifts. No one's expecting the venerable action stars to move as swiftly as they once did, but given the movie's obtrusive editing, Chan's and Li's martial-arts talents seem merely on par with Michael Angarano's, and they simply *can't* be.

The only true reason to see the film is for Li's thrillingly manic Monkey King performance. Grinning and chirping and egging on his enemies with demonic glee, Li may be more likable in this brief role than in any of his other American endeavors, and I'll contentedly ignore the fact that 2006's *Jet Li's Fearless* was billed as the star's official retirement from the martial-arts genre. May the renegeing continue, so long as his subsequent action-adventure outings are less dreary than *The Forbidden Kingdom*.



DECEPTION

The new movie starring Ewan McGregor, Hugh Jackman, and Michelle Williams is titled *Deception*. I'm starting with that information because, for some reason, I keep getting its title confused with that of the 2005 movie

Derailed

, which starred Clive Owen, Vincent Cassel, and Jennifer Aniston.

Derailed

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was a laughably contrived, plot-hole-ridden, wholly thrill-less thriller with a hysterically inept "gotcha!" finale in which a mild-mannered sap falls into an erotically charged relationship, is blackmailed by a vicious killer, and eventually discovers - to everyone's but the audience's surprise - that the woman he loves is actually in

cahoots

with the vicious killer.

Deception

, on the other hand, is Never mind.