

## Carrie On: "Sex & the City" and "The Strangers"

Written by Mike Schulz

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### **SEX & THE CITY**

The experience of the *Sex & the City* movie was, for me, akin to pissing away a weekend afternoon watching two-and-a-half hours' worth of sitcom episodes, in succession, on DVD; by the time the closing credits rolled, I felt quite entertained, a little exhausted, and vaguely guilty for not doing something more productive with my time.

I hasten to stress the "for me" portion of that statement, because for certain audiences - and you know who you are - this Big-screen expansion of HBO's beloved series is going to be, or already *has* been, absolute bliss. (True story: At one point during the packed Friday screening I attended, a patron's cell phone rang, but no one seemed to mind, as its ringtone was the *Sex & the City* theme music.) It's all here: the familiar characters, the lunches, the Cosmos, the relationship traumas, the double entendres, the nudity, the shoes, the - count 'em! - three separate fashion montages ... . If you were routinely in thrall to the adventures of Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and her three BFFs (Kim Cattrall's Samantha, Kristin Davis' Charlotte, and Cynthia Nixon's Miranda), it's hard to fathom how you couldn't derive pleasure from writer/director Michael Patrick King's cinematic spin-off, which is like the TV show on steroids. (A warning to the haters among you: The movie is *exactly* the movie you think it'll be.)

As someone who stuck with the series, and its magnificent acting quartet, for the first three seasons but eventually lost interest, I felt the same sensation during the film: They had me, and somewhere along the line, they lost me. It's not that I was ever bored; King maintains a lively pace, and even when the subplots are remedial or worse - Samantha's voyeuristic infatuation with her ripped next-door neighbor went on for a painfully long time - the performers' sharp comic instincts and dramatic chops kept things humming. And God knows there's always something to look at - even the *food*, to say nothing of the designer outfits, looks like something whipped up by Industrial Light & Magic.

Yet as someone who doesn't instinctively swoon at the sight of Manolos with a six-inch heel, too much of *Sex & the City* felt, for me, repetitive and even a little lazy; it's a movie so afraid of

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shaking up its proven formula that not even the bedposts really shake. Again, I stress that "for me." Fifty-six million dollars' worth of "for others" would likely disagree.



### ***THE STRANGERS***

Writer/director Bryan Bertino's *The Strangers* is about as low-rent as modern horror movies get: a 15-minute prelude in which an unhappy young couple (Liv Tyler and Scott Speedman) deals with the emotional fallout of a rejected marriage proposal, and a 70-minute aftermath in which the pair is terrorized by a trio of menacing assailants. It's also about as

*good*

as modern horror movies get: intense, emotionally gripping, and really,

*really*

scary. If, like me, you were jazzed by the film's nerve-racking trailer but assumed that the movie itself couldn't be as much fun as its preview, you're in for a great, long-overdue surprise - a fright flick that

*more*

than lives up to its publicity.

You may feel a twinge of uncertainty at the outset, as a series of title cards offer the standard "what you are about to see is based on true events" portentousness, while a deep-voiced announcer vocalizes the text for those who don't want to be bothered with reading. And the coda, I'll admit, is a letdown; after what appears to be a spectacular closing shot (featuring a humdinger of a creepy/funny curtain line), a blackout leads to two additional, unnecessary minutes that feel tacked on at the studio's urging. Nearly everything that happens between *The Strangers*

' bookends, though, is spellbinding, from the simple, hugely empathetic portrayals of the leads to the wickedly clever and haunting soundtrack selections (bravo for the fiendish use of Merle Haggard's country ballad "Mama Tried") to the masked attackers themselves, whose visages you simultaneously don't want to look at and don't want to

*stop*

looking at.

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In his first outing as a director, Bertino seems to possess an almost preternatural sense of just how long he should hold a shot for maximum effect - the scene in which Tyler stands motionless while the unseen intruder enters the frame behind her and just *stands* there is almost unbearably thrilling - and he plays with audience expectation in exceptionally sneaky, satisfying ways. (You know that terror-flick staple of the heroine backing away, turning around, and - *Aaaa!*

- finding herself face to face with the killer? Here, the heroine backs away, turns around, and faces ... nothing. It's

*infinitely*

scarier.) Add to this Bertino's unsettling compositions, his devious use of silence and explosive sound, and his nearly fetishistic attention to detail (check out the wall clock, which appears to be functioning in real time), and

*The Strangers*

is nirvana for genre fans exhausted by recent torture-porn witlessness; it's the very first horror movie of the millennium that I'm officially dying to see again.