

I'm with Stupid: "You Don't Mess with the Zohan" and "Kung Fu Panda"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 11 June 2008 02:17



YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE ZOHAN

The latest Adam Sandler vehicle, *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, is crass, infantile, moronic, and, on almost any level you can name, pretty damned offensive. I could

kill

myself for having so much fun at it.

Just to be clear: I don't care for Adam Sandler's screen persona. At *all*. God knows I've tried. In more than a dozen movies over the past decade, I've tried to get on-board with his apologetic politeness that morphs into abject hostility; his slow-witted delivery that, I

think

, is meant to sound relaxed; his smug assurance that everything he does is endearing, no matter how misogynist, homophobic, or otherwise socially retarded. Similarly, I don't like Adam Sandler

movies

. Not even the one directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. Not even his

best

one (which I still consider to be 2006's

Click

).

So allow me a moment to sigh, gulp hard, and admit ... I liked *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*.

Not a

lot

. But I liked it.

In my defense, it's the first Adam Sandler outing I've seen where its star isn't playing some variant on the Adam Sandler *type*, which helped enormously. Gone, for the moment, is the mumbling, synthetic "everyman" that doesn't act like *any man* I've ever met; in

Zohan

, Sandler portrays a strong, confident, sexually secure hedonist, and it's an exceptionally good look on him. In his role as an Israeli counter-terrorism expert who longs to cut hair in the States,

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Sandler has been given a deep tan, superhuman powers, and a frighteningly intimidating package (often seen in non-explicit closeup), and he's more entertaining than he's ever before been on screen.

Zohan is so unembarrassed by his appetites - especially for hair-styling and hummus and women of a certain age ... probably in that order - that he's irresistible, and Sandler plays him with a profound seriousness and sweetly loopy honesty; the actor generally seems to be talking down to his characters, but strangely, the profoundly unrealistic Zohan might be the first of his roles to actually *inspire* Sandler. (Along with Robert Smigel and the omnipresent Judd Apatow, he's listed as a co-screenwriter.) Against all expectation,

Mess with the Zohan

's lead

isn't a juvenile conception; in Sandler's hands, this butt-kicking, morally unconflicted super-agent transcends cartoonishness.

I won't pretend the movie is great. Or even *good*. You'll still have to deal with rampant misogyny, gay stereotyping, and the

de rigueur
gross-outs

. (At the screening I attended, the loudest disgusted groan came from the sight of Lainie Kazan's bare ass, which could've been a stand-in's, but I was too busy staring at her ass to be sure. Seriously. I

hate

myself.) You'll still have to deal with excruciatingly predictable plotting and senseless motivations and awkward celebrity cameos (though Mariah Carey, of all people, has a good bit). You'll still have to deal with Rob Schneider. And for every good gag, you'll have to deal with three or four losers.

But, man, how funny those successful gags *are*! As much as I tried to resist, I giggled like hell at the sight of the Zohan catching a bullet in his nostril, and soothing a crying child with a nerve-pinch that renders him unconscious, and using a live cat as a Hacky Sack. I roared at the *Rocky*

parody that found John Turturro - as the Zohan's Palestinian arch-nemesis, the Phantom - cracking eggs into a glass before his early-morning run and releasing chicks. (Yes. He swallows them.) And I laughed - albeit appreciatively - at the film's contention that Israelis and Palestinians might get along fine if they simply aimed their hatred at closed-minded, bigoted American yokels instead. (It ain't the

ne plus ultra

of foreign-relation politics, but it's a start.) So go ahead and enjoy

You Don't Mess with the Zohan

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Just don't tell anyone I sent you.



KUNG FU PANDA

Unlike with Adam Sandler, I instinctively laugh at pretty much everything Jack Black does. And with *Kung Fu Panda*, he's found his perfect CGI-animated counterpart - a chubby, good-natured bear for whom every experience is a varying degree of awesomeness. The movie is your typical, pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps empowerment fantasy for pre-teens, but Black's vocals are so genial and off-handedly funny that he provides the (expectedly) wizardly martial-arts routines with a jolt of humanism; it's all clever and well-paced and beautifully designed, but the actor's comedically bashful, even *soulful* readings linger in the mind longer than the tactile visuals. I wish

Kung Fu Panda

were better; the storyline's pretty dull and unsurprising, and aside from Black and Dustin Hoffman, the rest of the talented vocal cast isn't very interesting to listen to. (Their readings are so generic that I wasn't sure which animal was voiced by Angelina Jolie and which by Lucy Liu, and I completely mistook Ian McShane for John Hurt, who isn't even

in the movie.) But the film remains pleasant, harmless, and mostly diverting, and it's far better-made than that Sandler movie. Which I actually liked better. Just go ahead and hand me that cyanide tablet

now

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