

Stupor Man: "Hancock"

Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 09 July 2008 02:24



HANCOCK

It's been a couple of days now, and I find that my feelings toward the Will Smith blockbuster *Hancock*

remain naggingly unresolved. And unfortunately, those feelings aren't going to be resolved through writing a review, because most of what I find troubling is troubling because of a mid-film plot development that I wouldn't dream of giving away. In the end, I found

Hancock

to be funny, smart, silly, exciting, preposterous, maddening, and unexpectedly haunting, but until it becomes safe to discuss the movie in full, it'll be tough to explain exactly *why*

Actually, the funny, smart, and exciting can be addressed immediately. Marvel Comics used to publish a monthly series titled *What If ... ?*, which presented alternate-universe spins on the fates of their heroic characters, and the setup to

Hancock

s like the ultimate

What If...?

joke: What if an invulnerable superhero was also a surly, destructive, drunken reprobate?

In this world according to director Peter Berg and screenwriters Vincent Ngo and Vince Gilligan, Smith plays John Hancock, an L.A.-based sot blessed with superhuman strength, the ability to fly, and the *inability* to age. Less blessedly, he's also unable to resolve a crisis without initiating four or five of his own, engendering the hatred of his fellow Los Angelinos; Hancock's inebriated aerodynamics find him crashing into more buildings than he manages to avoid, and he can't prevent a man from being crushed by a locomotive without forcing the entire train to topple off its tracks. (Not even little kids refrain from shouting "Asshole!" after his every feat of derring-do.) It's in this latter scenario that Hancock meets advertising wizard Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman), who wants to repay the gruff superhero for his life-saving, train-wrecking actions through a complete public-relations make-over: a new outfit, a new attitude, and enough control over his powers to stop filling the streets with fresh potholes upon each landing.

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During these early scenes, you might find yourself having an absolute blast at *Hancock*, partly because it's a kick watching Smith trade his quick-witted charm for aggressive loutishness, and partly because the digital effects have been engineered so masterfully that, as opposed to nearly every other summertime blockbuster, they succeed in continually

surprising

you. As he did in

Friday Night Lights

and the recent

The Kingdom

, Berg employs a deliberately unsteady hand-held camera for much of the film, and when the pricey visuals intrude on this vérité style, the experience is off-putting in the best way - the superheroics are given unanticipated gravitas through jolts of documentary-style realism. (It's the sensation you would've felt throughout

Cloverfield

if the movie itself weren't so laughable.)

There's an added perk to Berg's filmmaking style here, as it allows several of the most memorable visuals to be mere throwaways; images of our soused hero cutting glass and shaving using only his fingernails are presented with disarming matter-of-factness, and a scene of Hancock returning a beached whale to the ocean (and wiping out a sailboat in the process) is glimpsed only on YouTube. *Hancock* is a *sneaky* blockbuster. It casually drops outrageous conceits into a wholly believable, lived-in world - fittingly, the most hiss-able figure on-screen is Nancy Grace - and the effects whiz by almost as fast as the jokes. (And with Smith and Bateman delivering them, that's really saying something.)

Unfortunately, there's also a downside to this realistic bent. (There are actually *two*, if you include the appallingly literal punchline to Hancock threatening to shove a man's head up another man's ass.)

Once Hancock begins to clean up his act, the more traditional elements of the movie's superhero narrative - the action set pieces, the overly insistent musical score - feel tinnier and more hackneyed than they otherwise might've, and there's something too cute about the scenes of Hancock attending group therapy and grudgingly learning to praise his law-enforcement allies; the early scenes are so good, and so

unusual

, that many of the later ones feel simplistic and pandering in comparison, and the extended climax featuring Hancock battling a trio of escaped convicts is as generically loud and unmemorable as any you've seen this (or in

any

) summer.

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But the one element of *Hancock* that viewers will most want to talk about, I'm guessing, is the one I can't get into, a legitimate shocker involving Hancock's past and the character of Ray's wife, Mary, played by Charlize Theron. (Remember the big secret Theron kept from Bateman in season three of *Arrested Development*? This one is *bigger*.)

During the movie's first half, Mary keeps staring at Hancock with an odd mixture of curiosity and fear, and the revelation as to

why

opens a can of worms that the movie doesn't delve into with nearly enough depth - the subplot is more fascinating, and more infuriating, than can be adequately handled by this clever summertime diversion. I'll say no more about it, but I will

say that Theron, in a superb performance, has never before been as radiant on-screen - she's so beautiful it's

distracting

- and if she can be talked into sequels and/or prequels to

Hancock

, I'll be among the first in line.