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THE MUMMY: TOMB OF THE DRAGON EMPEROR

Obviously we're not meant to take *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* seriously, as it's a fantasy in which Brendan Fraser kicks the crap out of Jet Li. But honestly, even on this harmlessly dopey franchise's own lowbrow terms, could director Rob Cohen's installment be any more witless?

After a torturous B.C. prologue in which Jet Li's evil emperor turns into chocolate and melts - at least, I'm *pretty* sure that's what happened - we're whisked to 1946, where the Chinese action star is found, instead, awaiting resuscitation through some sort of Life Serum. The plotting eventually involves world-traveling explorers Rick and Evelyn O'Connell (Fraser and Maria Bello, substituting for the sensibly absent Rachel Weisz), their college-aged son (Luke Ford), the wisecracking Jonathan (John Hannah), an immortal sorceress (Michelle Yeoh), a trek to Shangri-La, a destructive avalanche, some helpful Yetis (one of whom usurps Macaulay Culkin's "*Yes!!!*" gesture from *Home Alone*), armored skeletons, and a yak with an upset tummy. Yet despite all the characters and all this activity, no amount of serum - or CGI - could bring this overstuffed, under-imagined offering to life; given the remedial staging, wan attempts at emotionalism, tacky-looking effects, and elbow-in-the-ribs obviousness, Cohen makes original *Mummy* director Stephen Sommers look like Steven Soderbergh.

Considering, though, that Cohen didn't have a credited hand in the movie's dreadful script (that dishonor goes to Alfred Gough and Miles Millar) and doesn't embarrass himself *on*-screen, there's plenty of blame to go around. We've reached the point this summer when Fraser's bangs are officially giving more interesting performances than their owner, but everyone here winds up looking asinine; Bello, in particular, appears alarmingly out-of-place, and offers an alarmingly inconsistent accent. (Asked to read the inscription on a mystical Faberge egg, Bello's Evelyn admits, "Ancient Chinese isn't my forte." Neither is British, apparently.) And who was the genius behind the casting of Luke Ford? This guy looks and sounds a lot like Matt Damon, except he's beefier, petulant, and wholly unappealing; you cringe for the beautiful Isabella Leong, who's forced to flirt with this lummox.

While two kids in the audience giggled like mad when the yak puked on Hannah, this latest, and hopefully last, *Mummy* venture is deadening enough to put most sentient adults to sleep, or at least *would* be if it wasn't also so gratingly obnoxious. At one point, Li's resurrected warrior screams "AWAKE!" (with sub-titled capital letters) to his hordes of mummified minions, and it felt like he was addressing me personally.

SWING VOTE

As much as I enjoy making fun of him - primarily because he provides so many *reasons* to - I really, truly didn't want the Kevin Costner movie *Swing Vote* to be as bad as it looked. And during the film's early scenes, and at random moments throughout, it wasn't.

It's always great fun, to say nothing of a relief, to see the actor portraying a foul-mouthed, drunken mess, and although director/co-writer Joshua Michael Stern's comedy too-conveniently establishes Costner's Bud Johnson as the child to his precocious 12-year-old daughter Molly's parent, you're immediately won over by his hung-over surliness and omnipresent bed-hair. *Swing Vote*'s premise, which finds this happily apolitical dip responsible for electing our next president, is pretty ludicrous, of course. But the script does an unexpectedly clever, reasonably smart job of showing how the improbable could actually be *possible*, and once it does, I was expecting the inevitable, comedic complications to be handled with similar wit and economy.

Silly, silly me. In no time at all, *Swing Vote* becomes an unholy disaster. We're prodded into laughing at the expected stereotypes - Kelsey Grammer's Republican prez is a warmongering, camera-ready egotist, Dennis Hopper's Democratic opponent is a liberal wimp promising a "rainbow White House." But then we're prodded into *feeling*

for them, as both are shown to be under the questionable influence of their victory-hungry advisors (Stanley Tucci and Nathan Lane, both doing their best under the circumstances). We're asked to chuckle at Bud's confused, probably inebriated ramblings on TV, and then asked to sob for him whenever he disappoints Molly (the preternaturally confident Madeline Carroll, who's obviously watched
Whale Rider
). We're cued to roar at Bud's idiot-lout friends, then told to admire them; we're given a movie-long build-up to the dawning of the candidates' consciences, and when they're finally allowed to
voice
them, we cut to another scene.

There *are* entertaining sequences, especially the misguided TV spots that echo Bud's presumed beliefs on immigration, gay marriage, and abortion. (It's distasteful to say, but the abortion commercial is really damned funny.) And Mare Winningham shows up as Costner's screwed-up ex, and for two minutes, is so stunningly good that you wish she'd stash the movie in her back pocket and walk away with it. But despite the scattered highs, *Swing Vote* turns out to be exactly like the characters it mocks. Depressingly shallow and all too easy to see through, it's a movie that'll do anything -
anything
- to win your approval. Fittingly, you wind up not believing a word it says.