

Meet the Prez: "W.", "The Express," and "Max Payne"

Written by Mike Schulz

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W.

I'm not exactly sure what kind of movie Oliver Stone's *W.* is trying to be, but that just makes it easier to appreciate it for what it *is*: A terrifically entertaining political comedy (with tragic undertones) that plays a bit like a sequel to Hal Ashby's 1979

Being There

, in which a series of borderline-ludicrous circumstances find a friendly, well-meaning simpleton elected commander-in-chief. Now what?

Of course, we've all spent the last eight years in the wake of "Now what?", and so the surprise, the downright *shock*, of Stone's George W. Bush portrait is that it doesn't feel the least bit angry. It's entirely possible that age has merely mellowed the director of *Platoon*

, *Born on the Fourth of July*

, *JFK*

, and other rabble-rousers. Yet even during the film's documentary footage of Iraq War horrors - the inclusion of which is dramatically necessary but morally questionable - you don't sense the flaring of Stone's famed temper, cinematic or otherwise. (Like many, he may simply be too stupefied by this particular chapter in American history to work up much outrage over it.) What that leaves us with in

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is a movie without any real reason for being, but one that's so funny and sad and touching and strange that it can't (or at least shouldn't) be ignored.

Josh Brolin plays the titular W. (generally pronounced with two syllables), and while he's far more likable - and, as proven in the scene in which he announces the impending invasion of Iraq, a far better actor - than the leader who routinely pops up on our TV sets, his mannerisms and vocal timbre are just enough like President Bush's to be lightly comedic without being distracting. Above all else, though, Brolin is *sincere*, and it's the actor's affinity for his subject that, in the end, makes him - and the film itself - so memorable.

Whether enduring the wrath of George Sr. (James Cromwell, miscast but effective), flirting with Laura (a sweet, mostly immaterial Elizabeth Banks), or finding himself genuinely, painfully stymied at a routine press conference, Brolin's George W. exudes utter earnestness, as he should, and even becomes delicately moving; Stone's and screenwriter Stanley Wesier's conception of the figure may be simplistic and convenient - the son who ascends to America's highest office all in an effort to earn Poppy's love - but the actor plays this conceit with honesty and conviction, and a tangible sense of irony. (His subtext always seems to be, "How did I wind up *here*?") Brolin, in *W.*, may be one of the few Americans left who doesn't appear to be sitting in judgment of the president, and it's a measure of his success in the role that, by the film's end, we feel a little less judgmental, too.

The movie *W.* isn't quite as good as the actor playing W. Though Weimer's script - which follows George from his college days in 1966 to early 2004 - is rather cleverly constructed, the dialogue is *really* clunky, an awkward mixture of obligatory exposition, half-hearted supposition, and familiar sound bites. (We've already heard much of this film's conversation on the news and in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, just not in *W.*'s contexts.) And as the movie barely addresses such events as the 2000 election, it's easy to get annoyed with a few of the scenes the movie chooses to include *instead* ; President Bush choking on a pretzel is in the film because... President Bush once choked on a pretzel. Cue cheap laughter. (I could also have done without the "The Yellow Rose of Texas" playing over the montage of military bombings.)

Yet Stone's film proves continually surprising, mostly because of how rarely such "satiric" scenes actually occur - *W.* may err on the side of comedy, but in general, it plays fair. The President's religious faith is frequently acknowledged but never mocked - the moment when the President becomes born-again is handled with astonishing tact - and with actors Richard Dreyfuss, Thandie Newton, Toby Jones, Scott Glenn, Jeffrey Wright, and Bruce McGill walking

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a fine line between impersonation and caricature, the Cabinet scenes are broad enough to be funny yet subtle enough to send the occasional chill down your spine. (The film's best moment finds Wright's Colin Powell asking Dreyfuss' Dick Cheney about their exit strategy for Iraq, and the Vice-President responding, "There *is* no exit. We *stay*.") *W.* isn't merely a sensational screen entertainment but, against all expectation, an *empathetic* one, and it even features one of the most satisfying movie climaxes of the year - a title card reading "The End." That might just be the most purely *hopeful* moment in the entire Oliver Stone canon.



THE EXPRESS

Director Gary Fleder's inspirational sports drama *The Express* concerns Ernie Davis, the first African-American winner of the Heisman trophy, and you'll probably know what you're in for within the first five minutes, when a grade-school Ernie finds himself tormented by a pack of bullying Scut Farkuses, one of whom berates him with, "He's black *and* retarded!" ("Retarded"? *Really* ? In the 1940s?) You'll definitely know what you're in for a few scenes later, when Ernie and an African-American pal are in line for their pee-wee football uniforms, and the last available jersey is handed out to the boy in front of Ernie. "Don't worry," the grinning-bigot coach tells him, "the other team won't have any trouble recognizing you!" *Heh heh heh heh heh* !"

Welcome to yet another well-meaning, formulaic, rather insulting triumph-of-the-underdog saga in which a powerful true-life tale is trashed through ham-fisted obviousness and deathly predictable storytelling, and good intentions alone are expected to make up for an almost total lack of personality and nuance. The adult Ernie is played by Rob Brown, who's likable and

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completely forgettable, and Dennis Quaid plays the gruff coach (with "gruff" being his only character trait), and there's little point in dwelling on the movie; crummy as it is, the football scenes are mildly diverting, and it'll probably do its job for those who really want to see it. But Omar Benson Miller, at least, adds good humor and warmth - he's much more effective here than as Spike Lee's plaintive man-child in *Miracle at St. Anna* - and Nelsan Ellis, as Ernie's brother, is *really* fine; the actor comes through with prickly bursts of resentment and fire that *The Express* barely knows what to do with.



MAX PAYNE

There are so many beautiful shots, interesting performers, and satisfying throwaways in *Max Payne* that long periods pass in which you actually *forget* that, in the end, it's really just a dopey, pumped-up video game adaptation. As Mark Wahlberg's grim title character hunts down the killers of his wife and baby, director John Moore lends this action-thriller some unusual, threatening rhythms and surprisingly potent images - that scene of the winged valkyrie dropping a man from a high-rise is no less effective for being overexposed in the trailers - and there are bits that get you giggling for being so enjoyably bad-ass; the film's slow-motion shoot-outs are all well and good, but I preferred the subtle pan to Payne cracking his knuckles before beating the crap out of Chris O'Donnell. (At last! Movie-lovers have been waiting *years* for this scene!)

By design, Wahlberg isn't allowed much range, but you don't necessarily *want* range from this kind of comic-booky construct. He's enjoyably intimidating, which is all he needs to be, and besides, there's plenty of variety in the supporting cast: Beau Bridges, Ludacris, Donal Logue, Kate Burton, Amaury Nolasco, Olga Kurylenko, and the impossibly gorgeous Mila Kunis. (With this role following her supremely engaging turn in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*

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, I'm prepared to declare this Mila Kunis Year, if not Mila Kunis Century.) The film is oftentimes great fun, which just makes its failings all the more pronounced - the quicksilver scenes are generally followed by long, lumpy ones, the final reel (especially) is riddled with clichés, and the movie's nutty weather patterns are truly distracting, with light snowfalls in one scene leading, without warning, to pummeling rain

in the next. (At one point, Moore even has Wahlberg shoot an office sprinkler so it can rain *inside*

.) And for all its entertainment value,

Max Payne

's storyline is a bust. "A drug?" asks Kunis once the plot is (belatedly) revealed. "

That's

what all this is about?" I know. I was disappointed, too.