

## Continental Divide: "Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa," "Soul Men," and "Role Models"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 12 November 2008 02:05

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### **MADAGASCAR: ESCAPE 2 AFRICA**

Dreamworks' animated hit *Madagascar* concerned a group of Central Park Zoo denizens who, en route to Africa, find themselves stranded on the island of the film's title, and ended with the citized animals forcibly, though not unhappily, taking residence in their newfound environs. Not having seen *Madagascar* since its 2005 release, I'll

admit that I had to look up this last bit of information before catching

*Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*

. And if and when there's a

*Madagascar 3*

, I'll no doubt have to look up the details on

*its*

predecessor, because a mere two days after attending this sequel, I've already forgotten nearly everything about it.

Okay, that's not entirely true. I know that nearly all of *Madagascar's* characters, and their familiar voice-over actors, return: Ben Stiller's lion, Chris Rock's zebra, David Schwimmer's giraffe, Jada Pinkett Smith's hippo, Sacha Baron Cohen's lemur, et al. I know those nutty, militant penguins are back, as are the Penn & Teller-esque pair of chimpanzees and that instinctively violent Jewish lady who, in the original, kicked the crap out of Stiller at Grand

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Central Station. I know Alec Baldwin voices a physically similar, less threatening version of Jeremy Irons' Scar in *The Lion King*

, and that - being an animated Dreamworks outing - the film is riddled with intrusive pop-culture plugs. (The references to iPods,

*West Side Story*

, and George Peppard stick out most clearly.) But honestly, if its studio had just re-released *Madagascar*

under the new sequel's title, would anyone have noticed?

In the first outing, our New Yorker heroes discovered the joys of the wild and were taught the importance of friendship, and so it's a bit of a surprise when, in *Escape 2 Africa*, they have to learn these lessons all over again - these CGI characters have the same fights, experience the same hindrances, and come to the same realizations that they did in

*Madagascar*

. You likely wouldn't mind this if the movie was just as

funny

as

*Madagascar*

, but the key to the first film's hilarity was surprise, and surprise is what's missing here; Stiller rambles, Rock rants, Schwimmer does a Woody Allen, and it's all as tiresome as can be. (And the prolonged joke involving that butt-kicking grandma has gone on

way

past its prime.)

*Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*

looks good, and features a borderline-subversive subplot in which Stiller can't tell Rock apart from the hundreds of

other

zebras on the terrain. Yet the movie is still dull and repetitive, and feels all too unnecessary; the series isn't stepping backward with this installment so much as merely running in place. It's a treadmill sequel.



**SOUL MEN**

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*Escape 2 Africa* finds the late Bernie Mac voicing Ben Stiller's leonine father, but director Malcolm D. Lee's *Soul Men* is a far more fitting cinematic epitaph; onscreen almost constantly, Mac is supremely engaging, dramatically potent, and oftentimes really, really funny. Too bad the movie itself isn't. Mac and Samuel L. Jackson play the former backup singers for a recently deceased '70s R&B legend, and the film follows the bickering pair as they travel cross-country from Los Angeles to the performer's memorial concert at Harlem's Apollo Theater. It's basically Neil Simon's *The Sunshine Boys* as a foul-mouthed road-trip comedy, and cynically provides just about every stock character, sentimental detour, and crude set piece in the book. (Beware the Jennifer Coolidge cameo.) Yet *Soul Men* is almost worth watching just for its opening 20 minutes, in which the stars verbally assault each other with hysterical ferocity, and for the closing credits, which deliver a truly moving tribute to Marc and co-star Isaac Hayes, and their explosive, ingratiating talents. It's everything in between I could've done without.



### **ROLE MODELS**

Who do we have to petition to have Jane Lynch officially declared the Funniest Person in American Movies? The motion picture academy? The American Film Institute? The president-elect? David Wain's *Role Models* is a perfectly harmless, perfectly pleasant formula comedy about two ne'er-do-wells (Paul Rudd, less amusing than usual, and Seann William Scott, *more* amusing than usual) who are court-ordered to serve as "big brothers" to a pair of troubled tykes (Bobb'e J. Thompson and geek extraordinaire Christopher Mintz-Plasse), and it's exactly the movie you expect it to be: sometimes hilarious, sometimes saccharine, occasionally inspired - Rudd serenading Elizabeth Banks to Kiss' romantic ballad "Beth" is pretty great - and routinely, profoundly predictable. But every so often, Lynch shows up as the mentor program's sadistically belligerent founder, and blasts the movie into another orbit entirely. Proudly recounting her history as a coked-up wreck who found salvation, and denigrating Rudd and Scott with a fearless intensity that would give Bernie Mac and Sam Jackson the shakes, Lynch here outdoes even her performances in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and Christopher Guest's improv comedies for feral, almost sociopathic cluelessness. Despite the salty language, the unexceptional, mostly enjoyable *Role Models*

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is as safe as they come, yet there's

*nothing*

safe about Jane Lynch; her intimidating fierceness would be nightmarish if she weren't also a movie-lover's dream come true.