

Just Say "No": "Yes Man" and "The Tale of Despereaux"

Written by Mike Schulz

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YES MAN

It feels as though the teasers for *Yes Man* have been running since the first Bush administration, so I'm assuming everyone is aware of the film's 10-word comic premise: Jim Carrey always says "no," then learns to say "yes." If you're thinking the setup sounds an awful lot like the conceit behind 1997's *Liar Liar*, you're not wrong, and in his one-joke role as a depressed loan officer who decides to embrace life by acting against his natural impulses,

Yes Man

also requires Carrey to goose the proceedings with the sorts of rubber-faced buffoonery and "spontaneous" madness that the actor can pull off in his sleep. Unfortunately, that's exactly what he appears to be doing here.

There are a couple of chuckles in the film, and it features pleasant-enough supporting turns by Zooey Deschanel (making up for the ill will engendered by *The Happening*), Bradley Cooper, Rhys Darby, John Michael Higgins, Rocky Carroll, and Terence Stamp. But while *Yes Man*

isn't a wholly terrible movie, it's still a seriously depressing one, because it finds Carrey replicating his free-wheeling, happily demented comic shtick of years past when, based on the evidence, he's obviously not in a free-wheeling, happily demented mood. One of the movie's chief running gags is a visual one: whenever Carrey's Carl Allen is asked whether he'd like to do something that he steadfastly does

not

want to do, he takes the briefest of pauses and says "yes" with a frozen smile and stare that

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suggests "

hell

no." It's a good recurring bit, but would be a better one if you didn't imagine the star accepting his

Yes Man

role with the same teeth-clenched misery.

Carrey wraps his face in Scotch tape and acts hopped up on Red Bull and babbles (surprisingly poorly) as a drunken wreck, yet the maniacal gleam he exuded in *Liar Liar*, *Bruce Almighty*, or the Ace Ventura comedies is missing; the actor has been on a bum streak lately, but this is the first slapstick performance I've seen Carrey give in which his lunacy feels solely like a contract obligation. (And it goes without saying that director Peyton Reed's outing doesn't allow Carrey the room for nuance that helped shape

The Truman Show

or

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

.) Looking tired and defeated - and not done any favors by the movie's ugly cinematography - the performer attacks his madcap routines with strenuous effort, and while this is professionally admirable, it also proves to be utterly disheartening. How can you roar at Carrey's antics when all you sense is the strain? Many of the comedian's fans no doubt wish he'd return full-time to high-concept larks such as

Yes Man

, but Carrey isn't delivering a performance here so much as a derivative, and vaguely cynical, Greatest Hits loop. At one point, reacting to some moment of forced wackiness, Deschanel tells Carrey, "You're really unpredictable." Liar liar.



THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX

There's probably too much going on in the animated fable *The Tale of Despereaux* - concurrent plotlines, flashbacks, voice-over narration, storybook visualizations, talking rodents and fruit salads - but that's kind of what I liked about it. Adapted from the first offering in Kate DiCamillo's children's-lit series, the movie concerns a little mouse with big ears (voiced by Matthew

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Broderick) who fancies himself an adventurer, a seafaring rat (Dustin Hoffman) who unwittingly causes a fatality, and their efforts to enliven the populace of the magical kingdom of Dor after their ruler imposes a harsh edict: No more soup. That's a wildly simplified account, though, of what turns out to be a wildly complicated yarn, as the film also finds room for a subplot involving Tracey Ullman as a servant girl who resembles a pig, Sigourney Weaver as a mildly untrustworthy narrator, Kevin Kline as a prickly chef who converses with a human-shaped Horn of Plenty, and much, much more.

Yet while *The Tale of Despereaux* is an odd, sometimes baffling mix, it's also one of the year's most ingenious and visually distinctive animated works, and certainly one of the sweetest. Directed by Sam Fell and Rob Stevenhagen, the movie is overflowing with witty throwaway touches - I especially liked Broderick's mouse reading a book by walking along its pages, word by word - and scrupulously imagined detail; the kingdom-within-a-kingdom of Ratworld looks like an animated take on Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean ride. And while all the expected morals and Life Lessons arrive on cue, they're handled with delicate emotional shading and subtlety. (You might find yourself getting a little choked up at the film, and *without*

feeling like a sucker.) For all of its too-muchness,

The Tale of Despereaux

is inspiringly smart, and its vocal cast offers pleasures that sometimes extend beyond the movie itself; not only do we get a reunion of sorts between Weaver and Kline (co-stars of

Dave

and

The Ice Storm

), but in one scene, a dialogue between Frances Conroy and Richard Jenkins -

Six Feet Under

's Ruth and Nathaniel Fisher.

Combien miraculeux!