



NOTORIOUS

Every musician's life is different, of course, but every musical bio-pic seems fundamentally the same: The humble beginnings, followed by the first hints of greatness, followed by the early romantic interests, followed by the steady rise to fame, followed by the *new* romantic interests, followed by the explosive success, followed by the personal setbacks, followed by the *professional* setbacks, followed by the cementing of the legend ... and if the movie can find room for a title card reading "With his life he proved that no dream is too big," so much the better.

Director George Tillman Jr.'s Biggie Smalls bio-pic *Notorious* ends with this pithy sentiment, and throws in a few other clichés for good measure - the climactic montage of previous scenes, the protracted preamble to the lead's death - but in nearly other regard, the movie is fantastic fun. Scenes of the Notorious B.I.G. at his first recording session and in his triumphant gig at Howard University (performing a jubilant rendition of "Party & Bullshit") have the sort of dynamic, happy electricity that you go to bio-pics *f*
or

, and while the narrative arc may be typical, the propulsive energy behind it isn't; beautifully paced and edited, and boasting superior acting across the board - Derek Luke's Sean "Puffy" Combs may be a career high thus far -

Notorious

is smashingly entertaining. And newcomer Jamal Woolard is an absolute stunner as Smalls. He's so teeming with life and so dramatically and musically gifted that you respond to him the way most of the film's characters respond to Biggie - with pleasure and respect, and more than a little bit of awe.



INKHEART

Rap, Flap, Crap: "Notorious," "Inkheart," and "Paul Blart: Mall Cop"

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 26 January 2009 09:14

Though the plot of the children's fantasy *Inkheart* - in which the act of reading brings storybook characters to magical life - makes it sound a bit like the Adam Sandler slog

Bedtime Stories,

director Iain Softley's movie

is actually what you'd get if you took

The Princess Bride

and surgically removed all of its raffish good humor and personality. And while

Inkheart

lead Brendan Fraser is an improvement over Sandler, he's not

much

of an improvement; in his umpteenth role as a patient, good-natured dad with bangs trying to stay two steps ahead of marauding CGI effects, the star's running and shouting here is wholly interchangeable with his running and shouting in

Journey to the Center of the Earth

and the third

Mummy

movie. (For all of our sakes, it might be time for Fraser to give the kiddie-action-adventure genre a rest already.) The film finds room for Helen Mirren, Paul Bettany, Jim Broadbent, Andy Serkis, and Toto (plus others) from

The Wizard of Oz

, but nothing in David Lindsay-Abaire's busy yet dull script - based on a Cornelia Funke novel - makes much sense, and the seemingly arbitrary storyline is far less interesting than

Inkheart

's random moments of throwaway cleverness. The movie is a bummer, but at least I enjoyed the climactic smoke monster (a gargantuan version of the one in

Lost

), and Broadbent's authorly pride at meeting one of his nastier fictional creations ("Isn't he *awful*

!" Broadbent beams), and Jennifer Connelly - who, in real life, is married to Paul Bettany -

delivering a seconds-long cameo as Bettany's bride. One can only imagine their dinner conversations during filming. "How was your day, Paul?" "Not bad. I blew fireballs out of my palms, watched Helen Mirren ride a unicorn, and got chased by flying monkeys. How was yours?"



PAUL BLART: MALL COP

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From what I've gathered, the critical party line on *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* seems to boil down to: "It's not as bad as you'd think." Personally, I'm hard-pressed to fathom how it could be *worse*

. Even allowing for the rampant idiocy of the script, which appears to have been written by second-graders, and the staggeringly poor lighting and incoherent editing (scenes either run five beats longer than necessary or end before they've found their punchlines), director Steve Carr's comedy-in-name-only is almost soul-crushingly unfunny, and about as repellent a star vehicle for Kevin James as could be imagined.

Taking on a cadre of larcenous ninjas - all of whom appear to have dropped in from a Mountain Dew ad - intent on making Black Friday a bigger hell than it already is, the tubby comedian's only purposes here are to serve as a figure of either cheap ridicule (there are *dozens* of laugh-at-the-fatty gags) or cheap melancholy (poor, lonely Blart weeps to Barry Manilow), and it's all as witless and hateful as can be; the movie reaches its absolute nadir in the sequence in which Blart grapples with an equally rotund female shopper while the camera indiscreetly ogles her exposed rolls of flesh. (Amazingly, horrifically, adults in the audience

roared

at this.)

Paul Blart: Mall Cop

is so terrible that I actually muttered "Oh

no

... " when the great Bobby Cannavale showed up, because I couldn't bear to see what humiliations the movie had in store for him, and as refreshing as it is to see the saucer-eyed Jayma Mays in a romantic lead, I wanted to compose a writ of injustice at how badly used she is here. (The actress' patented stare of dazed incredulity is, understandably, given quite the workout.) In one scene, Blart reveals his incompetence by whiling away his time in an arcade while the crooks cause mayhem just out of earshot, and the sports-themed video game Blart is playing keeps crying out, "

Foul

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Foul

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Foul

!" My thoughts exactly.

For a review of Revolutionary Road, see "[Scenes from a Marriage](#)."

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For a review of Slumdog Millionaire, see " [Game Show and Tell](#) ."

For reviews of Frost/Nixon and Underworld: Rise of the Lycans, see " [Wolves](#) ."