

Written by Mike Schulz  
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## ***THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT***

Seven weeks into its release, the ludicrous, laughable *Taken* is still in the top five at the box office, and it wasn't until seeing *he Last House on the Left* that I had a theory as to why

: One should never underestimate the cinematic appeal of watching Daddy beat the crap out of his kid's assailants. It's doubtful that director Dennis Iliadis' remake of Wes Craven's grimy 1972 horror show will attract

*Taken*

-size crowds, but it, too, frames its nightmare around a brutalized teenage girl whose survival depends on the ass-kicking resourcefulness of her vengeful father (with her mother lending a hand, and a knife, for good measure). The difference between the movies, though, is that

*The Last House on the Left*

is actually a pretty good one.

Not *great*, mind you. As in most of its genre's efforts, characters too often behave with staggering stupidity - our teen heroine's escape attempt from the backseat of a car, though intense, is maddeningly ill-considered - and the terror is somewhat undone by the overwrought portrayal of the normally excellent Garret Dillahunt. Yet Iliadis displays a masterful gift for scenes of unnerving dread and expectation (there's a monstrously grim, and Grimm, feel to the film's woodland sequences), he takes special care in creating sympathetic, believably grief-stricken protagonists (Tony Goldwyn, Monica Potter, and Sara Paxton are uniformly superb), and he paces the escalating tension and threats of violence so expertly that the *outré*

shocks, when they do come, are legitimately shocking. It's been a long while since an on-screen killing made me reflexively shout out "

*U-u-ugh!!!*

" - maybe since Edward Norton's curbside execution in *American History X*

- but the bit here with the garbage disposal did the trick. This isn't everyone's idea of fun, to be sure, but if it's yours,

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*The Last House on the Left*  
should satisfy your masochistic tendencies quite nicely.



### **MISS MARCH**

Admittedly, the competition has been fierce. But in *Miss March* - a gross-out rom-com involving a girl's rescue from the lures of the Playboy Mansion - Trevor Moore gives what is thus far, by far, 2009's most aggressively irritating screen performance. His Tucker Cleigh, the destruction-prone slacker pal to the recently comatose Eugene Bell (Zach Cregger), is meant to be one of those mildly annoying, hilariously exuberant life forces that goads our hero into doing the right thing. Yet the only thing Moore's Tucker could realistically goad anyone into would be the immediate procurement of a new phone number, a restraining order, and a gun. Through the course of this witless, risible comedy, the actor pops his eyes and drops casual vulgarities and scrunches his face to suggest "confused" or "baffled" or "mystified" (the extent of his range here), and I can't decide which was more unbearable: listening to Moore's achingly unfunny readings, or watching him twinkle at the camera with oh-so-adorable self-satisfaction, as if to say, "Yes, I'm here ... and you're welcome."

If I were Eugene, I'd slip back into that coma stat

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Moore and Cregger, who co-wrote and -directed *Miss March*, are two of the creators of the clever sketch-comedy series *The Whitest Kids U'Know*, any five minutes from which would be smarter and more satisfying than this movie's 90; crass, meandering, and horrifically filmed, it's like *The Sketch That Never Ends*. The less said about the experience the better, except to add that, following *The House Bunny*, this is the second movie in six months to feature Hugh Hefner playing himself, and again, he does a remarkably poor job of it. Hef's a multi-gazillionaire; couldn't the guy have paid someone to feed him lines through an earpiece, so we wouldn't have to watch his darting eyes scanning

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the teleprompter?



### ***RACE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN***

As silly, frenetic, instantly disposable kiddie adventures go, Disney's *Race to Witch Mountain* is n't bad at all. It's been so long since I've seen a movie in which speeding cars attempt to outrace flying saucers that I wasn't even bothered that most of the action scenes, haphazardly edited and employing too many close-ups, border on the incoherent; director Andy Fickman keeps the tempo brisk and the spirit light, and is wise enough to recognize that no amount of (kinda weak) sci-fi visuals can match the enjoyment provided by fresh, funny performers.

The plot, which finds a pair of young aliens-in-human-form attempting to save their planet from annihilation, may be standard stuff, but the goings-on are given terrific friendliness and pep by Dwayne Johnson (exactly the type of lightweight heavyweight required here), AnnaSophia Robb, Alexander Ludwig, and, in a fantastically funny cameo, Garry Marshall (although we *Lost in America* fans, dying to hear Marshall say "Santy Claus" just one more time, continue to wait in vain). Plus, we're treated to added cheer in the form of Carla Gugino, who plays the *de facto* mom to *Race to Witch Mountain*'s aliens, and whose previous big-screen roles include playing the mom of a superhero in *Watchmen*, and the mom to Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids*. And you thought *your* offspring were troublemakers.