

High School Mystical: "17 Again," "State of Play," and "Crank: High Voltage"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 20 April 2009 06:00



17 AGAIN

If there were any lingering doubts as to whether the body-switching comedy *17 Again* was tailored specifically for heartthrob Zac Efron, you should know that in the movie's very first scene, Efron's character, Mike O'Donnell, not only appears as the star player of a high school basketball team, but quickly breaks into a spontaneous, energetic dance routine with the cheerleaders. That's right, folks! It's

High School Musical:

Big

-ger and Better

!

Happily, though, director Burr Steers' movie - which finds Mike's depressed, 37-year-old self (played by Matthew Perry) reliving his glory days after being magically reincarnated as a high school junior - isn't an embarrassment. (It's the movie's *über*-perky score and lame visual effects that are the embarrassments.) Although

17 Again

borrowes liberally from

Back to the Future, Freaky Friday

,

and all those late-'80s bastard children of

Freaky Friday

, there's still enough oomph in this fantastical plotline to produce a few laughs and good-natured "e-w-w-w"s - returning to the school that his children attend, Efron's Dad-in-teen-form gets hit on by his own daughter - and while he doesn't yet possess much comic range, the film's star proves to be a comfortable and confident screen presence even when

not

staring dewey-eyed at Vanessa Hudgens. Efron still appears slightly miscast here, as he doesn't often suggest an adult sensibility within Mike's strutting showboat, but he's perfectly pleasant, and comes up with surprisingly sharp bits of business; I particularly enjoyed his habit of asking questions with fatherly earnestness and then pressing a concerned finger to his lips,

High School Mystical: "17 Again," "State of Play," and "Crank: High Voltage"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 20 April 2009 06:00

as though preparing to respond to the answers with a paternal "Well, here's what I think... ."

I've got a question, though: Was Efron (or Efron's handlers) aware that *17 Again's* supporting cast was lifting his star vehicle right out from under him? Thomas Lennon is hilarious as Mike's unspeakably wealthy, unspeakably nerdy best pal - in the best of many inspired touches, he sleeps in a *Star Wars*

landspeeder - and that spectacular comedienne Leslie Mann is a constant joy as the elder Mike's soon-to-be-ex-wife, understandably troubled by the arrival of this young man who's a dead ringer for her high school sweetheart. (The supremely subtle Mann performs double takes with her eyes.)

The Office

's scene-swiper Melora Hardin scores as a prim and proper principal, and even the actors cast as Efron's kids (Michelle Trachtenberg and Sterling Knight) are given funnier routines, and display more natural comedic instinct, than

17 Again

's lead. You may roll your eyes at

17 Again

's silliness and schmaltz, but these performers manage to keep you pleasantly invested in the goings-on, and while a tired-looking Perry is a bit of a drag on the film, at least Efron's supernatural mentor is played by a reliably jovial character actor... even if your first sight of him is a bit of a shocker. I'm on board with a middle-aged man morphing into Zac Efron, but when, exactly, did Brian Doyle-Murray morph into Santa Claus?



STATE OF PLAY

For most of its length, director Kevin McDonald's *State of Play* is a professionally assembled but rather uninteresting thriller - solid, clever, and more than a little dull. In it, the young, beautiful aide to a Washington D.C. congressman (a nicely inscrutable Ben Affleck) is found to have killed herself by leaping in front of a train, but as her death appears connected to a series of

High School Mystical: "17 Again," "State of Play," and "Crank: High Voltage"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 20 April 2009 06:00

recent, seemingly unrelated killings, schlubby newspaper reporter Russell Crowe and blogging upstart Rachel McAdams team up to tackle the story, asking themselves: Could the woman's suicide actually have been a murder, and could there be a conspiratorial effort to hide the truth from the press? (Answers: Yes, and yes, or there'd be no movie.)

As these types of paranoid thrillers go - with well-dressed scoundrels making cryptic threats and at least one tense sequence set in a poorly illuminated parking garage - *State of Play* isn't bad. It just isn't much of

anything

. Though the script is credited to a trio of gifted writers (Matthew Michael Callahan, Tony Gilroy, and Billy Ray), the movie's only claim to inventiveness lies in the testy, and happily unromantic, pairing of Crowe and McAdams, yet even this isn't handled with much finesse. The actors are fun to watch, but Crowe's die-hard newspaperman spends so much time railing against the infiltration of bloggers - who, it's frequently suggested, don't do anything like the work of

real

journalists - that the movie begins to seem as stodgy and behind-the-times as Crowe's character does.

State of Play

is partly designed as an elegy for the fading newspaper trade, but it barely gives you reason to

regret

the advent of online journalism. (And whenever Helen Mirren's snippy editor-in-chief shows up, reminding Crowe of the paper's responsibilities to its shareholders and demanding that he turn in his story before completion, you begin to think that print media can't die off quickly

enough

.)

But just past the film's halfway point, Jason Bateman shows up, and delivers everything that *State of Play*

had previously been lacking: wit, electricity, and

loads

of personality. Playing an amoral, bisexual press agent whose blasé affectlessness suggests a life spent cleaning up sleaze and being well paid to do so, Bateman provides the movie with a jolt of grubby humanism, and it's indicative of

State of Play

's blandness that the movie doesn't seem to know

what

to do with him. (He's dispensed with after 10 too-short minutes.) The actor more than makes his mark, though. Sequestered in a seedy motel room, Bateman is spied on by two of Crowe's next-door accomplices; one listens to his nattering and concludes, "He's a douche," while the other responds, "I

love

this guy." I'm with

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 20 April 2009 06:00

him



CRANK: HIGH VOLTAGE

Jason Statham's 2006 action-thriller *Crank* was reprehensible, trashy fun. The new *Crank: High Voltage* is merely reprehensible trash. I'm not sure I'll be able to adequately describe just how low writer/directors Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor sink with this putrid franchise-extender, but at one point here, a naked pole dancer gets shot in the chest, and we watch as her breast implants leak mucus-y fluids and deflate... and that's one of the movie's *least* offensive images. (The boorish, Neanderthal laughter I heard from certain audience members during this and equally risible scenes chilled me to the bone; they were the sounds you'd image high school bullies making while holding a freshman upside-down and giving him a swirly.)

As Statham hunts down the Asian thugs who've stolen his well-worn heart and replaced it with an untrustworthy mechanical ticker, other sequences find a heavily tattooed gangster removing his nipples with a scalpel (in gory close-up), a man having his elbow sliced off, a disembodied head drop-kicked into a pool, and Ling Bai's hooker repeatedly bashing her pimp in the nuts with a bike. (Poor Ms. Bai's career may never recover from this cinematic nadir, but the same might be said for Dwight Yoakam, Amy Smart, David Carradine, and Clifton Collins, Jr.) The film seems nearly diseased in its juvenile aim to shock and appall, but what's infuriating is that it can't even do *that* in any sort of entertaining way; scene after scene, the timing is so atrocious, and the editing so incoherent, that you're left with little choice but to stare at the screen in slack-jawed disbelief.

Crank: High Voltage is like a viscera-happy Tarantino flick played at the wrong speed, and somehow, it gets even worse when completely divorcing itself from reality through *outré*

High School Mystical: "17 Again," "State of Play," and "Crank: High Voltage"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 20 April 2009 06:00

fantasy scenes, which suggest

Saturday Night Live

skits as written by Mike Myers - not the former cast member, but the sick little psychopath from Rob Zombie's

Halloween

remake. In the very last shot before the closing credits, a demonically grinning Statham slowly lifts his middle finger at the camera - at

us

- and in almost 40 years of movie-going, I don't think I've ever witnessed a more redundant gesture.