BEST IN SHOW

The genius of Christopher Guest lies in his belief that nothing is funnier than mediocrity. (He's the antithesis of Peter Shaffer's Salieri in *Amadeus*, who saw it as a tragic failure.) In his two finest cinematic efforts, *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Waiting for Guffman*, the performers examined in the "mockumentary" format - *Tap*'s hard rockers and *Guffman*'s thespians - were delightful because of their clueless self-satisfaction; they truly thought they were creating Art, or at least really kick-ass entertainment. And the joke blossomed every time we watched them perform their shows before audiences, because it turned out that these well-meaning hacks, while by no means terrific, *weren't all that bad*. They might have been lacking in talent, but their enthusiasm was infectious, and it made sense that their shows were hits. (God knows I've seen worse community-theatre productions than *Guffman*'s *Red, White, & Blaine*.) Guest, who co-wrote both films and served as director for *Guffman*, was thereby able to poke fun at his characters *and* have you genuinely rooting for them at the same time.

If there's a major flaw with his latest offering, the dog-show satire *Best in Show*, it's that the characters themselves don't have any special talents apart from their ability to raise prize-winning pooches, so you don't feel as close to them as you ordinarily do in a Guest production. Due to the nature of their roles - allowing the spotlight to shine on their canines - they seem almost recessive by the time the dog-show competition is under way. But, as far as flaws go, that's about it - *Best in Show* is an uproariously smart and clever movie, the best we've had in many months. It might lack the richness in character of *Tap*

and
Guffman -
there are about twice as many main characters to follow here - but the story construction is even stronger, and there are numerous moments and actors that are laugh-out-loud funny. It's a sensational piece of work.

Using the same *faux*-documentary style that gave *Guffman* its edge, we meet several participants of the 150th Mayflower Dog Show in Philadelphia. Among them: Meg and Hamilton (Parker Posey and Michael Hitchcock), a neurotic yuppie couple whose pooch has been traumatized by witnessing their lovemaking; ex-party-girl Cookie (Catherine O'Hara) and her husband Gerry (Eugene Levy), who gradually realizes that
everyone
has slept with his wife; Scott and Stefan (John Michael Higgins and Michael McKean), a kimono-clad couple who speak in a series of
bon mots
; Sheri Ann (Jennifer Coolidge, channeling Karen Black), an ultra-rich trophy wife who has a close relationship with her poodle's trainer (Jane Lynch); and Harlan Pepper (Guest himself), a good-ol'-boy from North Carolina who practices ventriloquism on the side. All are hoping to snare the Best in Show ribbon, and we follow them from their initial planning to the Mayflower event itself.

Even without well-defined characters, and character traits that leave them bordering on caricature - Meg and Hamilton both wear braces, and Gerry was literally born with two left feet, although these characteristics don't have any satiric point - the actors are astonishing. (And *Guf fman*
fanatics will be thrilled to see returning players like Bob Balaban, Lewis Arquette, Deborah Theaker, Don Lake, and Linda Kash in minor roles.) Although
Best in Show
's script is credit to Guest and Levy, it was mostly improvised by the cast, and a more inspired group you couldn't hope to encounter. It would take paragraph after paragraph to do justice to them all, but the standouts have to be O'Hara, marvelously subtle and somewhat sleazy; Higgins and McKean, who turn what could have been offensive stereotypes into something droll and exceptionally witty; and Mr. Best in Show himself, Fred Willard. Playing an ultra-obnoxious dog-show announcer against a seething-under-the-surface British pro (the splendid Jim Piddock), every word Willard utters is hysterical; he gives the film a shot of unadulterated zest (and he's so funny that Guest is able to film the dog-show competition itself truthfully, without unnecessary physical gags).

As he showed in *Guffman* and now in *Best in Show*, Guest is such a master of the mockumentary format that you don't find yourself asking the big questions that the movie never

answers: Exactly *who* is filming these people, and *why*? The film moves with supreme confidence and energy, and in the end, you'll actually find yourself excited about who'll take home the blue ribbon. Co-writer-director Guest and his exceptional cast and crew have certainly earned one for themselves - *Best is Show* is a madcap joy, a little movie that'll leave you with a great big smile.

PAY IT FORWARD

Pay It Forward, director Mimi Leder's adaptation of Catherine Ryan Hyde's bestseller about a youth who is challenged to make the world a better place, is reprehensible for many reasons, but especially for its use of Haley Joel Osment as an object of emotional blackmail. His amazing turn in *The Sixth Sense* was powerful precisely because of its simplicity - he was just a sweet little kid who was deeply scarred, and deeply scared, by his ability to see the dead, and every time he looked into the camera with those frightened, red-rimmed eyes, you felt protective of him. He gave a modestly clever ghost movie gravity and soul. But here, Leder makes Osment a figure of radiant saintliness, a child Too Good for This World, and it's absolutely offensive; Osment works hard at the role, but it's in the service of a story so hackneyed and maudlin that you never think you're watching a real kid. Leder uses the young actor himself, *not* his character, to wring tears from the audience - she seems to be saying, "Look at how selfless and kind Haley is! Don't you just wanna hug him?" - and it's one of the most heinous, least inspired choices a director could make.

Not that she does well by the grown-ups, either. As Osment's teacher, Kevin Spacey dulls down his natural bite and works variations on self-pity (which worked for *American Beauty* because he eventually *changed*); Helen Hunt, playing Osment's alcoholic mom, seems to be overdoing *everything*; and talented actors like Jim Caviezel, Jay Mohr, and Angie Dickinson are all undone by ridiculous roles. (Dickinson plays the swankiest homeless lady you've ever seen.) Add to this a

convoluted, unnecessary flashback structure, a sappy,
Touched by an Angel
storyline (The pyramid scheme as life-saver! How novel!), and Leder's propensity to overstage even the film's quietest moments, and you have a true turkey. It's the biggest waste of cinematic talent in many a moon, a
Forward
movie whose thinking and execution are all backward.