

Lost Weekend: "The Hangover," "Land of the Lost," and "My Life in Ruins"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 08 June 2009 06:47

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THE HANGOVER

Imagine yourself at a wild, debauchorous, shameful-good-time party, one at which you imbibe copious amounts of booze and laugh all night, yet one that you get to enjoy with no subsequent hangover. That's *The Hangover*.

I had hoped that director Todd Phillips' raucous comedy - which concerns a migraine-riddled, memory-deprived trio's attempts to make sense of a bachelor party gone horribly awry - would be funny, and it *is* funny; at just over 90 minutes, I'd say that, by rough estimate, there are about 175 laughs. (An *incredible average*.) But with a script by *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*

's Jon Lucas and Scott Moore, I didn't even bother to hope that the film would be smart, and considering that it's another Hollywood slapstick in which grown men are proven to be, in reality, just really tall babies,

The Hangover

turns out to be

sensationally

smart. The characters may be recognizable stereotypes, yet they're given reams of loopily offhanded, clever dialogue, and they keep revealing hidden aspects to their personalities that take you by surprise; in an unusual move for a gross-out farce, you don't know everything about a character in his or her first minute on-screen.

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From the ominous views of Las Vegas in the film's opening credits to the shocking hilarity of the closing credits, nothing in *The Hangover* happens quite the way you expect, and Bradley Cooper, Ed Helms, and Zach Galifianakis - in a career-making comic performance - are so disarmingly *real* as the beleaguered groomsmen that their characters' hardships and triumphs carry emotional weight to match the happy madness. You want them to suffer, because it makes for entertaining viewing, but you also want them to *stop* suffering, because of how much you grow to *like* these guys. (It's the rare comedy that actually earns its conveniently upbeat finish.) At one point here, while amusing the baby that has mysteriously found his way into their care, Galifianakis shows Helms his new trick: He takes the child by the arm and makes it look like the tyke is masturbating. Helms laughs, then quickly stops and shakes his head, appalled by what he's laughing at. Then he laughs again. That's *The Hangover*, too.



LAND OF THE LOST

For the life of me, I don't understand *Land of the Lost*. I'm not talking about the plot, though it's definitely incomprehensible - some rigmarole about a nutjob paleontologist who discovers a portal to a bizarre universe and encounters a toothy lizard who wants to rule the galaxy and ... whatever. And I certainly see the financial sense in securing Will Ferrell for the lead, because when Ferrell is in blustery, blubbery, yowling-infant mode, a portion of the audience will laugh at him no matter how inane his material is. (At my screening, a few kids applauded at the film's conclusion. *Applauded!*) Yet what in heaven's name is the logic behind a studio spending more than \$100 million to remake a tacky, witless piece of kiddie-show crap and turn it into a tacky, witless piece of PG-13-rated crap? With the intentionally obvious jokes taking place on intentionally phony sets populated by intentionally lousy-looking CGI creatures, director Brad Silberling's "comedy" seems almost deranged. Ed Wood spent, like, a *billionth* of this film's budget on his entire

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oeuvre
, and those movies were
way
funnier than
Land of the Lost
.



MY LIFE IN RUINS

The romantic comedy *My Life in Ruins* finds *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*'s Nia Vardolos now serving as a hapless tour guide

in
Greece, and after seeing it, I have just a few questions.

With all those incredibly beautiful coliseums and land- and seascapes serving as background, couldn't director Donald Petrie and cinematographer José Luis Alcaine have fashioned an entertainment that didn't look like it was shot in someone's backyard? With such a diversity of cultural and ethnic stereotypes at his disposal - the movie's bus of fools includes clueless Americans, prissy Brits, drunken Australians, horny Spaniards, and a lovable Jewish mensch - couldn't screenwriter Mike Reiss have come up with a few gags that wouldn't have been considered cornball 50 years ago? (One of the travelers is a corporate bigwig for IHOP who cusses by shouting, "Flapjacks!") And while it's terrific, I guess, that she's lost weight, may I ask: What the hell happened to Nia Vardalos? Once upon a time, she seemed charming, but with her affected readings and frozen smile, the star can't even eat an ice cream cone here without the action looking painfully forced. (Granted, in this case, maybe it's just fear that the weight will return.)

Yet as lazy, rom-com claptrap goes, *My Life in Ruins* isn't *wholly* unbearable. Badly shot or not, gorgeous Greek vistas are still gorgeous Greek vistas. The tourists' jokes (and roles) may be insulting, but happily, a few witty comics - including Richard Dreyfuss, Rachel Dratch, and Sheila Bernette - are on hand to play them. And while she doesn't bring much to this particular

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party, at least Vardalos is naturally ingratiating enough to warrant some empathy ... even if
actual *sympathy* is reserved
for the people sitting around you.