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***FAME***

Not long into Kevin Tancharoen's remake of *Fame*, there's a brief sequence that completely underscores the difficulty - if not impossibility - of successfully updating Alan Parker's R-rated musical drama from 1980 for young audiences in 2009.

The scene starts with a speech by the principal of New York's Academy of Performing Arts, played, in a sweet touch, by Debbie Allen, the lone holdover from the original's cast. Standing before the students whom we will watch grow from anxious freshman to polished seniors, she talks about the opportunities they'll have and the challenges they'll face, and stresses that their dreams *can* come true, but only through discipline and hard work. Most of the kids listen to her with earnest, rapt concentration. One doesn't, though. She's busy texting. It's a fast, funny moment, but it leads to a troublesome question: Will the demographic for whom this PG-rated *Fame* was made actually hear Allen's heartfelt words, or will they, too, blithely resume their texting?

Based on the evidence, director Tancharoen and screenwriter Allison Burnett aren't at all certain, because for everything that's wise and trenchant and touching about *Fame*, far more is formulaic and maudlin and phony - everything that a teen crowd reared on *American Idol* probably expects it to be, and perhaps even *wants* it to be. With its "spontaneous" dancing in the streets and hot-lunch jams, Parker's *Fame* was hardly a model of gritty realism. But at least the movie felt vital and alive, and the suffering was as palpable as the joy; whether it was Barry Miller killing at an open-mic night or Irene Cara "auditioning" for a slimy photographer, there was always something at stake for the characters. Here, though, there's *nothing* at stake. Gifted though they are, the young talents express only surface desire and drive, and the incessant soap-opera banalities dull your rooting interest even further. This *Fame* is moderately entertaining but pretty underwhelming. It's an easy film to text through.

That's a shame, because so much of it is terrific, especially whenever the teachers are around. Here's an idea: Now that Hollywood has remade the movie, what say we get a remake of the *Fame* TV series, with only passing attention paid to the students, and the focus instead on the characters played here by Charles S. Dutton, Kelsey Grammer, Megan Mullally, and Bebe Neuwirth? (Maybe it could run on CBS.) The beauty and realism of these actors' portrayals - each informed by years of stage experience - can't be overstated, and both Tancharoen and Burnett do their finest work when the focus is on the instructors guiding their charges with honesty and eloquence. (There's a marvelous scene in which Neuwirth tells a not-talented-enough ballet dancer that he might make a wonderful teacher some day, and Dutton is exquisite when he explains to a wannabe actor/rapper, "You get to play angry characters, but there are no angry actors." There are, of course - just no *good* ones.) Dutton, Grammer, Mullally, and Neuwirth provide *Fame* with humor and considerable empathy, and to the movie's credit, the students not only respect but *like* these tough-minded but fair educators - their scenes offer hints about the great movie this *might've* been.

Yet like many students, *Fame* itself quickly and routinely forgets about its teachers, instead offering the standard takes on the standard romantic woes and parental stubbornness. (One girl's father refuses to let her play piano for a school production of *Chicago* by growling, "I won't have my daughter playing honky-tonk songs 'til all hours of the night!" - a line that was probably first uttered in '20s-era Chicago.) You might hope that the musical numbers would be impressive. But the dance routines are undone by (expectedly) chaotic editing, and aside from Naturi Naughton's gorgeous take on the original *Fame*'s "Out Here on My Own," the songs are energetically sung but defiantly unmemorable, including the climactic - and, for this particular high school, prohibitively expensive - sing-along about being yourself and daring to succeed and not giving up ... . I expect it'll get plenty of play during the upcoming season of *Idol*. Granted, my hopes weren't high, yet I'm still bummed that this *Fame* doesn't exude the excitement - the *Fame!-*ness - of its 1980 inspiration. That movie was definitely a product of its time, but this one is merely

product.

***SURROGATES***

Jonathan Mostow's *Surrogates* is a perfectly enjoyable little genre throwaway - speedy, kind of clever, and of no importance at all. The storyline is like an action-thriller take on the online game *Second Life*, Bruce Willis scowls as a gruff homicide detective and wears a lacquered deadpan as his robotic (and blond!) avatar, and Mostow keeps the pace zipping along and the silliness relatively negotiable. I liked it fine. I would've liked it more, however, if it didn't end so stupidly, with the film's shadowy nemesis threatening to kill a billion people, when all he *actually* needs to do is hit a couple keys on his computer's keyboard and eliminate his problems without bloodshed. Über-villains, I'm telling you. They never take the easy way out.