WHIP IT

In case you hadn't heard, the coming-of-age comedy *Whip It* marks the directorial debut of Drew Barrymore, and it's an ideal project in a Baby's First Directing Gig way; the film is exactly the kind of earnest, peppy, relentlessly formulaic Hollywood outing in which a novice helmer can get her feet wet without causing too much damage. The surprise of the movie, though, is that it's so enjoyable, especially considering that so far as its storyline goes, nothing in it is the least *bit* surprising.

Ellen Page plays Bliss Cavendar, a teenage outcast in a small Texas town who finds her *raison d'être* in professional roller derby, and given *Whip It*'s setup, Shauna Cross' screenplay (based on her novel) manages to incorporate every cliché you could possibly think of, and even a few you couldn't. There's the brittle mother (Marcia Gay Harden) who senselessly parades her daughter on the beauty-pageant circuit, and the ineffectual dad (Daniel Stern) who meanders through with passive cluelessness. There are the tough-as-nails teammates with hearts of gold (led by Kristen Wiig), and the sneering rival (Juliette Lewis) who feels usurped by the new girl's popularity. There's the wisecracking best friend (Alia Shawkat) and the indie-rocker love interest (Landon Pigg). There's the accident-heavy training sequence and the gradual rise to success and the parental disappointment and the inevitable broken heart ... and oh yeah, there's the climactic Big Game that lands *on the very same night* as the Big Pageant. Anyone wanna lay bets on whether Bliss winds up at the former, with her disapproving mother, unbeknownst to our heroine, watching from the stands? Anyone?

Barrymore can't do anything to make all this less predictable, as if any human being could, and the movie certainly has its share of awkwardly staged scenes, including what is easily the least romantic underwater make-out session in recent memory. (Poor Page looks far more terrified in the pool than she does on the track.) Yet Barrymore already possesses one quality that lifts *Whip It* above the norm, and should ensure plenty of future successes as a director: She's absolutely

fantastic with actors. Given what should have been an irritatingly one-note caricature, Harden fills her fretful mom with so many subtle shadings that she might almost be re-inventing the stereotype - her readings throughout are marvelously conflicted - and while their roles are no less obvious, Stern, Wiig, Shawkat, Lewis, Jimmy Fallon, Andrew Wilson, Zoe Bell, Carlo Alban, and Eve invest them with infectious humor and absolute conviction.

And towering above them all, so to speak, is the diminutive Page, who gives the *Juno*-drenched irony a rest, and vanishes into the soul of a sweet, smart, floundering young woman who you truly believe is grasping, for the very first time, who and what she wants to be. Nothing that happens here
is unexpected, but Page plays Bliss as if it's all unexpected to
her
, and the actress' performance honesty and clear-headed wit are exhilarating. Interestingly, the film's only bum portrayal comes from Barrymore herself, who's uncharacteristically charmless and abrasive as a spacy and violent teammate. She doesn't really hurt
Whip It
, though, and the movie itself is so sincere, good-natured, and heartfelt that, like Page's character, you can easily glide past its occasional obstacles. You happily roll with it.

THE INVENTION OF LYING

During its first 20 minutes or so, *The Invention of Lying* is so clever and sharp and riotous that you experience that giddy, tingling sensation you only rarely get at the cineplex - the feeling that you might actually be witness to the birth of a new comedy classic. Co-written and -directed by Ricky Gervais (who also stars) and Matthew Robinson, the film imagines a world in which people only tell the truth, in which even the
idea
of lying is unfathomable, and as high-concept comic setups go, this one, at first, seems just about infallible. Not only are we treated to the continual, painful hilarity of characters saying exactly what's on their minds ("I'm very threatened by you," says a restaurant hostess, for understandable reason, when seating Jennifer Garner), but Gervais and Robinson shrewdly recognize just how much of life would be altered in this sort of fabrication-free universe, and demonstrate accordingly. Advertisements are honest and succinct (the Pepsi slogan is "When

they don't have Coke"); cinematic entertainment consists solely of seated lectures on historical events; typical workplace greetings are rife with hostility. ("I've loathed every day I've worked for you," states Tina Fey, with a smile, to Gervais' screenwriting nebbish.) For the length of the film's first reel, its imaginings are brilliant and bracing, and allow Gervais - as the one man granted the power to lie - ample opportunity to showcase his genius for comedically put-upon anguish.

It doesn't take long, however, for your excitement to dull. Part of the disappointment comes from your realization that the film is following a dispiritingly lackluster blueprint, in which Gervais attempts to woo Garner despite his not being an ideal genetic match; both the narrative arc and its maudlin presentation will be familiar to anyone who's sat through even one romantic comedy over the past three decades. (Depressingly, *The Invention of Lying* climaxes with that hoariest of rom-com clichés - the interruption of a wedding-in-progress.) More dishearteningly, though, once Gervais discovers the ability to fib, the film's tone turns moralizing, and more than a little patronizing. Making up tall tales about "the man in the sky" who's controlling our lives, Gervais embarks on a coded attack on religion, and this storyline detour might've seemed outrageously subversive if it wasn't delivered with such dour melancholy. Yet strangely, we're not asked to laugh so much as weep - for all of the poor, deluded souls seeking answers to life's mysteries, and for poor, schlubby Gervais, who comforts the world with promises of an afterlife yet is still routinely called "a snub-nosed fatty." In the end,
The Invention of Lying
seems to be about little more than Ricky Gervais - the man, not the character - working out his misery and feelings of inadequacy. And while he's certainly not the first comedian to use filmmaking as a form of psychotherapy (hello, Woody Allen), he would've been smart to remember that it's hard to get audiences to empathize when you're telling them they're idiots.

For reviews of Capitalism: A Love Story, Pandorum, *and* Zombieland*, see* " *Moore and More* ."