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COUPLES RETREAT

The trouble-in-paradise comedy *Couples Retreat* may be criminally inane, yet you can't say that co-writers/co-stars Vince Vaughn and Jon Favreau aren't smart as tacks. Together with collaborator Dana Fox, they scripted a breathtakingly lazy and insipid vehicle that guaranteed them a two-month vacation on locales in Bora Bora and Tahiti, and somehow convinced Universal Pictures to pick up the tab. How ever did they do it? And how can we ensure that they never, ever do it again?

You know the setup, right? Four couples, each experiencing varying degrees of relationship turmoil, embark on a week-long stay on a tropical isle, and eventually connect and grow and blah blah blah while contending - "hilariously" - with self-help gurus and inappropriate yoga instructors and sharks and stuff. Given the gorgeous vistas and the cast that includes Jason Bateman, Malin Akerman, Kristen Bell, Faizon Love, and Kristin Davis, *Couples Retreat* should be perfectly harmless, and it is, so long as you don't consider the murder of your brain cells harmful. It's also so aggressively phony, ill-paced, and unfunny that the only entertainment I found came from trying to determine which scene was its most thoroughly noxious one. And all of them, really, were contenders.

It would've been easy to pick any of the couples-therapy passages, in which overexposed actors Ken Jeong and John Michael Higgins offer blandly eccentric advice, or any sequence

Beach Bums: "Couples Retreat," "Van Gogh: Brush with Genius," and "Anvil! The Story of Anvil"

Written by Mike Schulz

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that finds Vaughn doing his tired diarrhea-of-the-mouth thing, babbling on about testicular cancer and Applebee's. Favreau's low-comedy high jinks - getting an erection during a massage, having his masturbation session interrupted by a bellhop - are uniformly unappealing, as is the protracted rescue of Love's 20-year-old girlfriend (the shrill Kali Hawk) from the sinful pleasures of a neighboring singles-only island. The maudlin, violin-heavy scenes of men Learning to Love make you want to hide your face in embarrassment; the laughably overextended plug for *Guitar Hero* only makes you wish you were at home playing the game, where you'd no doubt have a lot more fun.

But for sheer, aching torment in this feature by director Peter Billingsley (Ralphie, *no-o-o-o!!!*), I'm not sure anything tops resort owner Jean Reno's climactic,

Wizard of Oz

-esque presentation of gifts to his departing vacationers, a jaw-dropping display of creative bankruptcy and nauseatingly unearned sentiment. You can't say, however, that its metaphor isn't apt, as

Couples Retreat

is devoid of both brains

and

heart, even though its complete waste of time and talent does suggest plenty of noise.



VAN GOGH: BRUSH WITH GENIUS

For reasons known only in Hollywood, *Couples Retreat* was the only new nationwide release to open this past weekend. So God bless the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre for offering a debuting-movie alternative in

Van

Gogh: Brush with Genius

, which, at a mere 40 minutes, is an hour-plus shorter than that painfully overlong comedy, and provides immeasurably greater enjoyment. Boasting radiantly vibrant colors and unexpectedly trenchant insight into the painter's process, director François Bertrand's documentary is a mostly outstanding primer on the master's output; it presents Van Gogh's professional chronology with speed and wit, yet also allows you the opportunity to really study - and marvel at - the works on display. (In a beautiful stylistic touch, the camera routinely fixates on one painting yet subtly shifts the focus from one side of the screen to the other, enabling us to

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examine the pieces nearly brushstroke for brushstroke.) Given the running length, much of the artist's saga is understandably glossed over, and some of the film's exclusions are confounding - where the hell is

Starry Night

? Yet

Brush with Genius

remains consistently involving and visually wondrous - an ideal art-history intro for kids - and offers added kicks with its narration, which finds Jacques Gamblin,

as

Van Gogh, delivering an impassioned and surprisingly cheeky first-person voice-over. "I created more than 80 paintings in two months," Gamblin's Van Gogh tells us. "Do the math." Aside from the ear thing, who knew the guy was such a cut-up?



ANVIL! THE STORY OF ANVIL

It's going to take a few more viewings to decide if the heavy-metal documentary *Anvil! The Story of Anvil*

newly released on DVD - is my favorite movie of the year, or if, as of this writing, it only *feels*

like it. But for the moment, suffice it to say that director Sacha Gervasi has crafted a heartbreaking, hysterical, intensely moving account of '80s rockers seeking professional vindication, and that even if you've heard that the movie is like a nonfiction take on

This Is Spinal Tap

, man, you have no

idea

. A band waylaid by inept management and shockingly poor travel plans? Mad success in Japan yet dismissive responses in the states? A trip to

Stonehenge

, for Pete's sake? The movie is remarkably candid and stunningly sincere while also doling out unimprovable laughs (even on the DVD's commentary track), and if you respond to

Anvil!

as I did, you may find that you don't just want to immediately purchase it, but purchase copies for each and every one of your friends; as a comedy, a tragedy, and a platonic love story, it goes to 11.