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THE TWILIGHT SAGA: NEW MOON

Like last November's film version of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, this November's follow-up, the helpfully titled *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, is a mostly dour affair, a vampire tale less concerned with blood-letting than with the pain of teenage heartache, romantic longing, chastity, and maudlin acoustic ballads. That's why, despite some occasional levity, it's a shock to find director Chris Weitz's movie boasting not one but two absolutely outstanding jokes.

One occurs after our heroine, Bella (Kristen Stewart), arrives in Italy, having crossed an ocean to prevent her undead soulmate, Edward (Robert Pattinson), from ending his "life." (Spoiler alert: She succeeds.) The lovers are subsequently forced into a meeting with an elite, malevolent cadre of vampires called the Volturi, and while riding the elevator to the cabal's underground lair, Bella, Edward, and their captors stand in silence - and listen to a tinny, Muzak rendition of grand opera. It's a smart, hysterical moment, and one topped only by a previous, quick cutaway shot of Bella's plane heading to Italy. It turns out she's flying Virgin America.

There are several other flashes of wit to be found in *New Moon*: werewolf Jacob (Taylor Lautner), in human form, scampering up the side of Bella's house and leaping through her

window; a smooth camera move that circles the despondent Bella as autumn turns to winter and winter turns to spring. But like the film's two best gags, these bits were met with dead silence at the packed Friday matinée I attended. What *did* the audience respond to? Well, just about everything that Bella's dad (Billy Burke) and high-school pals said, even when it wasn't funny, elicited cackles. Every mild reference to a particular *Twilight* touchstone - Bella's clunker truck, Edward's trapped-at-age-17 hottie actually being 107 years old - cracked the crowd up. And when, early on, Lautner took off his shirt to reveal a truly intimidating six-pack, the mostly female audience giggled excitedly for a full 10 seconds afterward.

In short, *New Moon* will probably make a sizable portion of its *Twilight*-loving target demographic very, very happy, even if those viewers ignore the elements that might make The Rest of Us happy. Personally, as a middle-aged man who hasn't read Meyer's books and isn't feeling the loss, I remain unmoved by this unfurling cinematic saga, with its determined, almost solemn pacing and its good-looking but desperately uninteresting leading characters. (If I want to experience a moody, metaphoric love triangle between a human, a vampire, and a shape-shifter, I'll just watch the first season of HBO's *True Blood* again, which at least features occasional scares, raunch, narrative surprises, Cajun blues music, and Anna Paquin.) Yet while I'm not crazy about the screen material or its doggedly earnest presentation - or, for that matter, the special effects, which are distractingly weak for a series that's going to reap untold millions - I'll readily admit that there's just enough that's good about *New Moon* to make it a painless sit.

Though their screen time is unfortunately diminished in this sequel, there are exceedingly likeable comic turns by Anna Kendrick and Michael Welch, and Weitz continually comes through with cleverly unforced visuals; a scene of Edward exiting his car and opening Bella's passenger-side door a split second later is a spectacular bit of throwaway amusement. And those late-film sequences in Italy give *New Moon* a visceral kick that you might be unprepared for even if you *have* read Meyer's novels. Not only does the great Michael Sheen show up, elegantly vicious as the Volturi leader, but so does Dakota Fanning, who, in the few minutes that her vampire is around, effectively steals the movie with her fierce, red-eyed focus and wicked Mona Lisa smile. The Internet Movie Database reveals that Fanning will return in next year's *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*. I might become a fan of this franchise yet.

THE BLIND SIDE

No one could've been less enthused than I at the prospect of *The Blind Side*, the true - or, more likely, truthy - story of Michael Oher (played here by Quinton Aaron) and his rise to pro-football greatness, and, seemingly, yet another opportunity for Sandra Bullock to strong-arm audiences into finding her plucky and adorable and other adjectives she hasn't been in over a decade. Amazingly, though, this predictable, feel-good weepie actually kinda *works*. On almost any level you could name, director John Lee Hancock's movie is incredibly easy to tear apart (and don't think mean-spirited jokes weren't running in my head all throughout). But even at its most saccharine and phony, the film exudes a spirited, family-friendly charm that's surprisingly infectious, and Bullock, against all expectation, is better here than she's been in ages: tough-minded, quick-witted, and refreshingly free of affectation. It's a proudly cornball, inspiringly big-hearted entertainment, and earns bonus points for country singer Tim McGraw as Bullock's contentedly put-upon spouse, who is as dryly hilarious as he is effortless. After meeting Oher's apologetically liberal tutor (Kathy Bates), McGraw turns to Bullock and deadpans, "Whoever thought we'd have a black son before we knew a Democrat?" A Hollywood movie with a major character who's an endearing, funny *Republican*? What *will* they think of next?!