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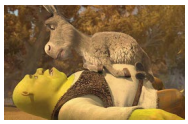
Sunday, 23 May 2010 15:15



SHREK FOREVER AFTER

Has there ever been a cinematic storybook adventure - to say nothing of an animated, comedic one - as profoundly joyless as *Shrek Forever After*? It's not just that the subject matter for this latest, potentially last, and certainly least of the *Shrek* series concerns middle-aged dissatisfaction and inertia, themes that aren't exactly conducive to lighthearted escapism. The bigger problem is that nearly *everything* about the film, from the plotline to the jokes to the voice acting, is lethargic and heavy-spirited, and that air of fatigue is likely intensified if, like me, you catch it in 3D, with the gray of your eyewear dulling the movie's already-pretty-dull color palette. From its opening beats, *Shrek Forever After* feels less like a follow-up than the grudging fulfillment of a contract obligation, and I left this third sequel feeling about 10 years older than I did before it began.

You can tell that a TV sitcom is running out of inspiration when it borrows from *It's a Wonderful Life* for one of those fanciful "What if our lives were completely different?" episodes, and so it is with *Shrek Forever After*, which finds Mike Myers' titular green ogre cast in the Jimmy Stewart role. Bored in his routinized, family-man existence with wife Fiona (Cameron Diaz) and three squawking one-year-olds, Shrek makes a Faustian deal with the embittered elf Rumpelstiltskin (Walt Dohrn), agreeing to trade one day in his childhood for one day spent contentedly terrorizing the townsfolk. (Shrek's 24-hours-of-freedom montage is the only truly buoyant sequence in the film, and only then because it's accompanied by Karen Carpenter singing "Top of the World.") Yet he should've read his contract's fine print. The day Shrek trades turns out to be the one in which he was born, and when he returns from his magical sabbatical, he enters an alternate reality in which Rumpelstiltskin rules the kingdom, Fiona leads an underground cadre of ogre rebels, Donkey (Eddie Murphy) lives in indentured servitude, and a too-well-fed Puss in Boots (Antonio Banderas) whiles away his days resembling a furry beach ball. (I still don't understand, however, how Shrek's not being born could have led to Puss' morbid obesity. Wasn't Banderas' kitty already in fighting shape when he first met our hero in *Shrek 2*?)

What follows, it should go without saying, involves Shrek trying to right this new world's wrongs

and learning to appreciate the domestic tranquility he took for granted - you get zero points for correctly anticipating the line, "I didn't know what I had 'til it was gone" - and to say this familiar, Capra-esque narrative is lacking in dramatic urgency is a sizable understatement. Still, you might be shocked by just how much *Shrek Forever After* is lacking in *comedic* urgency. It's true that all of the franchise's money-in-the-bank gags are duly accounted for: Donkey warbling from the discographies of Whitney Houston and Madonna; Puss silently pleading with wide-eyed adorableness; legions of fairy-tale hoofers grooving to whatever pop tunes were hits when filming began. Yet here, they share the same stale, going-through-the-motions vibe, and the movie's few attempts at fresh humor are unilaterally disappointing; the initially promising appearance of the mute Pied Piper, gliding into view atop an army of rats, yields nothing remotely interesting, and as voiced by Dohrn, Rumpelstiltskin is powerfully irritating, prone to fits of shrill, nasal whining to make Wallace Shawn sound like Keanu Reeves.

The movie's not without momentary grace notes - I enjoyed the brief sight of the Gingerbread Man battling an army of animal crackers - but it's so relentlessly blah that it even drains the energy from performers seemingly incapable of blandness. How do you cast John Cleese, Jane Lynch, and Craig Robinson and forget to give them anything amusing to say? Given the series' mostly tiresome storytelling and instantly disposable, guess-the-pop-culture-reference snarkiness, I haven't been a fan of any of the *Shrek*s, yet *Forever After* might even leave devotees grateful that this franchise has (hopefully) reached its close. It may not be a happy ending, but hey, at least it's an ending.

MACGRUBER

Given that *MacGruber* is a big-screen expansion of a popular recurring *Saturday Night Live* ske tch, I was surprised that this raunchy spoof of macho-action-flick conventions opened with a violent, three-minute prelude featuring absolutely no intentional laughs. Given that the movie stars Will Forte as the film's shaggy-haired MacGyver send-up and Kristen Wiig as his gal Friday, I was even more surprised that the following 85 minutes featured absolutely no laughs, intentional or otherwise. This insipid, juvenile, boring throwaway isn't worth the time spent either seeing or discussing it (
MacGruber
's idea of a running gag is the constant repetition of its bad guy's surname - Cunth), but it should

be noted that Ryan Phillippe's unflappable deadpan saves him from embarrassment - at least until he shoves the celery stick up his ass - and that Wiig's ability to make you smile during such a grimly unfunny "entertainment" might make her the most gifted performer on the planet.