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SEX & THE CITY 2

Sex & the City 2 begins with a multi-million-dollar gay wedding at which Liza Minnelli serves as officiator and headliner, and somehow manages to grow even more over-the-top, garish, and belief-defying over its next two hours and 20 minutes. It should be said that writer/director Michael Patrick King's follow-up is only rarely dull, mainly because the act of repeatedly lifting your jaw up off the floor can't help but keep you awake. Yet *S&TC2* is still an obscene and desperately unfunny ordeal, even if - maybe *especially* if - you derived occasional or continual pleasure from its six-season HBO forbear or King's 2008 big-screen offshoot.

I'm presuming you're familiar with our cast of characters? There's Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), the shoe-obsessed freelance writer now living in uptown Manhattan with financier hubby Big (Chris Noth). There's Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), the harried stay-at-home mom with a devoted spouse of her own (Evan Handler). There's Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), the successful New York lawyer happy in marriage (to David Eigenberg's Steve) and motherhood. And there's the ever-frisky publicist Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), who, at age 52, is fighting the onset of menopause with a whip and a chair. (In one of *S&TC2*'s few sharp gags, Samantha arrives at a soirée in the same dress that Miley Cyrus is wearing.) These loyal, nurturing, and financially more-than-stable BFFs have always been a little too good, and easily categorized, to be true. But at its best - in numerous half-hour increments on cable, and at random points during King's first film - *Sex & the City* also delivered emotional heft and complexity (to say nothing of big laughs) to match the copious spending and gossiping over cosmos. The show and its cinematic sequel may have been a fairy tale, yet the franchise's writers and quick-witted leading ladies frequently succeeded in convincing you that all was not wholly divorced from real-world experience.

Man, has *that* ever changed. After the unbridled tackiness of *S&TC2*'s opening nuptials and reception (which seem to rival *The Deer Hunter*'s in length, if not subtlety) and a few token scenes of the gals whining about the pressures of Having It All, our quartet of heroines is whisked away to an all-expenses-paid vacation at a chi-chi luxury hotel in Abu Dhabi. What results is enough to make you ask what the Middle East has ever done to deserve such foul treatment. Gone is any semblance of plot; beyond Carrie's

ridiculously contrived reunion with former love Aidan (the blessedly unforced John Corbett), the change in locale serves no purposes other than getting audiences to drool over the ostentatious extravagance, and enabling the women to bitch about their petty, NYC-based grievances while donning even uglier caftans than usual. Gone is any degree of off-the-cuff cleverness; the jokes, if one were forced to call them that, are really just groan-inducing puns - references to "Bedouin bath and beyond," "mid-wife crises," and the charming "Lawrence of my labia." Gone, in truth, are any nods to reality whatsoever: A sextet of Muslim women reveal that they wear gaudy Christian Dior gowns beneath their burkas; Samantha enjoys a hot-and-heavy encounter with a foreigner named - I swear I'm not making this up - Dick Spirt. (Later, the slutty publicist defiantly flips off a marketplace full of understandably offended Middle Easterners, and never before has stoning felt like such a justifiable punishment.)

No doubt all this would've been less excruciating if King - who did frequently wonderful work in the *S&TC* series and for HBO's Lisa Kudrow vehicle *The Comeback* - didn't waylay every sequence with deathly unimaginative staging and badly timed repartee. And it certainly would've been a better film if Carrie had been made to be less of a materialistic harridan, or if Charlotte had remembered a few of the lessons she'd already learned in previous installments, or if poor Cynthia Nixon was given
something
to do; Miranda's subplot involving her sexist, condescending law-firm boss is wrapped up
one scene after its introduction.
(Meanwhile, whoever was responsible for Pen
é
lope Cruz's cameo should be simultaneously thanked and smacked, as you want far more of this stunningly gorgeous, effortlessly engaging performer than the 30-or-so seconds we're given.) Alas, this
Sex & the City 2
is what we're left with, and it's a gross insult both to rabid fans and those who wind up seeing it merely out of curiosity or (for some of us) professional obligation. Crass, stupid, and lasting for what feels like an eternity, this sequel feels like
Sex & the City
after one too many facelifts; the movie may think it's fresh and vibrant and ageless, but in the end, it's stiff, and it's phony, and you barely recognize it at all.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

As cinematic adaptations of popular video games go, director Mike Newell's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* isn't that bad, I guess. Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, this desert-set action-adventure has some of the it's-throwaway-crap-but-who-cares? insouciance of his *Pirates of the Caribbean* outings, and there's just enough Machiavellian intrigue and leaping from rooftops and whizzing CGI effects to keep audiences moderately entertained. (Helping to keep us *legitimately* entertained is an enjoyably hammy turn by Alfred Molina, portraying a vaguely untrustworthy "small businessman" with silver molars and a fondness for ostriches.) There's always something going on, even if you're never quite sure what it is, and the movie is certainly a more cheerful summertime outing than Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood ...* although you could easily say the same for 80 percent of Ingmar Bergman's *oeuvre*. Yet, in the end, the film is disappointing not for what it is, but for what it isn't - namely exciting or inventive or in any way memorable. With its ensemble of mostly bland actors (including an unusually dreary Ben Kingsley, with heavy eyeliner) reading flat dialogue against monochromatic sets - and with most of the generic derring-do too-obviously performed by stuntmen - there's little to recall about *Prince of Persia* beyond Jake Gyllenhaal's newly buff packaging, which appears almost laughably incongruous with his endearingly goofy, little-boy-lost expressions. I understand that it's nearly *pro forma* for all of Hollywood's young, good-looking stars to bulk up and eventually front a wannabe-blockbuster franchise, but if I hadn't seen how extraordinary Gyllenhaal had been in *Donnie Darko, Brokeback Mountain,* and *Zodiac*, I'd have left this entertainment thinking that Newell had somehow cast, as his lead, the dimwitted human doppelgänger of Joey Tribbiani.