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GET HIM TO THE GREEK

It probably says less about the movie than our current movie culture when I say that, for my money, Nicholas Stoller's *Get Him to the Greek* is the smartest, shrewdest, and overall best film I've yet seen in 2010. The competition, after all, is in no way fierce; if forced to compose a 10-best list at this admittedly early point in this regrettably weak year, I'd include Stoller's raunchy comedy, Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer*, and then respectfully plead the Fifth.

Still, what an exceptionally fine surprise *Get Him to the Greek* turns out to be! Fans of *Forgettin g Sarah Marshall* - and a dozen-or-so viewings later, I consider myself more a zealot than a fan - certainly had reason to feel optimistic, as the "him" in this sequel-cum-spinoff is *Marshall*'s gloriously vain British rocker Aldous Snow, portrayed, then and now, by the feverishly inventive Russell Brand. But even those of us avid for a cinematic reunion with this sweetly lunatic pop figure might be shocked by what Brand and writer/director Stoller have in store for us here. For *Get Him to the Greek* doesn't merely provide the hilarity, random non sequiturs, and subtly (and *not* -so-subtly) parodistic songs we'd hope for in an Aldous-driven feature. We're also given a full-fledged dissection of Aldous' character, and the great joy of the film is that he turns out to have character to spare - this Aldous is funny, yes, but also wildly conflicted, and pitiable, and even borderline tragic. Co-produced by the ubiquitous Judd Apatow, the movie pulls off what last summer's *Funny People* didn't; it exposes the fundamental emptiness at the heart of a seemingly charmed celebrity life without sacrificing laughs, and without wallowing in self-pity or maudlin excess. The film is a lark, but as larks go, it's damned near *profound*.

As I'm potentially making *Get Him to the Greek* sound less enjoyable than it actually is, let me also say that Stoller's movie is cheerfully profane, sometimes aggressively gross, and presentationally buoyant even in its darkest moments. It's also, for those who care about such things, unapologetically skimpy on plot, which concerns the efforts of good-natured record-label upstart and Aldous Snow devotee Aaron Green (Jonah Hill) to get his idol from England to an L.A. concert in three days - a trek made challenging by Aldous' insatiable hunger for drugs, liquor, and women, in roughly that order. (Proudly sober in
Forgetting Sarah Marshall
, Aldous falls off the wagon -
hard
-
when his
African Child
CD is universally derided as the worst thing to happen to Africa since apartheid.) At first, it's jarring to see Hill and Brand teamed in this manner, as Hill was so hysterical as
Marshall
's Aldous-obsessed Hawaiian waiter, and the echoes are intensified when we're treated to a brief reprise of Aldous' signature (and riotous) "Inside of You" number. However, the two quickly establish an entirely different yet equally satisfying comic chemistry here - Aldous subtly coercing his "affable nitwit" chaperone into frequent acts of rock-star debauchery - and their affection for one another, as characters
and
performers, feels utterly genuine. At times,
Greek
manages to suggest a Hope-and-Crosby road picture with absinthe, vomit, and a baggie of heroin uncomfortably smuggled through airport security.

Yet even given the film's happy crudeness and the leads' winning camaraderie, what makes this comedy so memorable, and so unexpectedly resonant, is its insistence on presenting Aldous as an actual human being. The character is ridiculous, to be sure, but thanks to Stoller and especially Brand, he's absolutely no joke. Through encounters with his ex-lover (a sensational Rose Byrne) and his father (the ever-great Colm Meany) that are simultaneously satirical and emotionally honest, the full picture of Aldous' complexly troubled history gradually comes into view, and the rocker's drug use, while occasionally mined for humor, is also treated with welcome and necessary gravitas; the movie neither rewards nor fully absolves Aldous for his self-destructive behavior. Brand, meanwhile, plays his character's contradictions - and they are legion - with dazzling economy and wit, creating a trenchant, even moving portrait of a once-gifted talent gone spectacularly to seed. In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Brand lent the proceedings vitality and originality. In
Get Him to the Greek
, he lends it soul.

I'll admit that, in terms of the narrative and the gags, the movie is a little repetitive, and a few of its comic gambits - such as the disastrous attempt at a *ménage à trois* between Aldous, Aaron, and Aaron's girlfriend Daphne, played by Elisabeth Moss with her usual combination of eccentricity and charm - are a little unsatisfying. But *Get Him to the Greek* is still marvelously textured and ceaselessly entertaining, and I haven't even gotten around to mentioning its bevy of deliriously weird, drug-fueled images, none nuttier the sight of Sean Combs - powerfully funny as Aaron's short-tempered boss - eating his own head. Maybe you had to be there, but I highly recommend making the trip.

SPLICE

The science-fiction horror-thriller *Splice* is so clever and icky and deeply unsettling that it's a shame the film isn't just a *li-i-ittle* bit better. In director/co-writer Vincenzo Natali's updated take on *Frankenstein* (and with its leading characters named Clive and Elsa in honor of *Bride of Frankenstein* actors Colin Clive and Elsa Lanchester), Adrien Brody and Sarah Polley star as a pair of genetic-research scientists who, while in the employ of a multinational pharmaceutical conglomerate, create a new life form through a combination of animal, insect, and human DNA. Allow me to break the news to you: This turns out *not* to be the greatest of ideas. The movie, however, boasts *plenty* of great ideas, along with a pair of interesting and fully invested leading portrayals, gruesome jolts, a sick-joke subversion of traditional family mores, and a fascinating half-human/half-CGI figure (with performer Delphine Chanéac enacting the former half) who can breathe underwater, sprout wings, and kill unsuspecting kitties with a quick snap of her tail. It all makes for 100 minutes of queasily engaging genre fun, though the fun would've no doubt intensified had the final reel not gone in such a sadly predictable direction, and if Polley's plot-thickening change of character wasn't quite so abrupt, and if *Splice*'s genetic monstrosity weren't distractingly designed as such a bombshell. (Barring the missing

fingers and wishbone legs and dented cranium, this thing could pose for the cover of *Maxim* with no eyebrows raised.) Still, the movie remains a shivery, if slightly underwhelming, good time; you can get a good sense of both the movie's appeal and disappointment if you imagine David Cronenberg's *The Fly* with Jeff Goldblum not deteriorating, but gradually morphing into Marilyn Monroe.