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SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD

Is there any working film director who adores actors more than Edgar Wright? I ask this after recently viewing (for maybe the sixth time) the British helmer's action spoof *Hot Fuzz* and (for maybe the millionth) the untouchable zombie satire *Shaun of the Dead*, comedies with the rare distinction of being populated entirely with sharp, funny performers; even the walk-ons - or, in *Shaun*'s case, the lurch- and stumble-ons - are charismatic. And after seeing the director's latest, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World*, I think a wholly reasonable case can be made for Wright being the best friend that anyone with a SAG card and a dream could ever hope for. You could fill 110 movies with the joyous onslaught of personality on display in this movie's 110 minutes.

To be sure, a generous amount of that personality is visual, as this adaptation (co-written by Wright and Michael Bacall) of Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novels blends the clean, swift brushstrokes of a great comic book with the kinetically *outré* flair of a great video game. *Scott Pilgrim*'s fairly simple tale tells of an anxious, milquetoast, borderline effeminate 22-year-old (played, inevitably and spectacularly, by Michael Cera) who falls in love with Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), a down-to-earth hottie with an ever-shifting dye job; in order to win her affections, Scott must first vanquish the young woman's previous lovers, an egomaniacal and pissed-off lot known as "the seven evil exes." Story-wise, there's really nothing more to the film than that, but that description doesn't hint at the jaw-dropping verve and inventiveness with which Wright pulls it off.

From the movie's opening *seconds* - in which we're treated to a brilliant re-imagining of the traditional Universal Pictures intro, designed and scored as an '80s arcade game - *Scott Pilgrim* fizzes over with geek-chic wit: Doorbells are rung with the words "Ding Dong!" emblazoned on the screen; upon their annihilation, enemies explode into coins while points are tallied. For long stretches, the film is like a video game that's playing *you*. Wright stages Scott's one-on-one (and, towards the end, one-on-two) battles with feverish comic momentum and ingenuity - even the special effects are truly, surprisingly special - yet

he's also a playful enough director to know exactly when the movie's style should extend beyond its comic-book and video-game inspirations; one sequence between Scott and his out-and-proud roommate (a blisteringly entertaining Kieran Culkin) opens with a riff on the recognizable
Seinfeld
theme, finds Scott bursting though his front door
à la
Kramer, and accompanies his every intentionally lame gag and insinuation with the cackles and whooping gasps of a "live studio audience."

Scene for scene, there are perhaps more jokes in *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World* - visual, verbal, cerebral - than in the rest of the year's comedies combined; you leave the film with the distinct impression that, as with
Shaun
and
Hot Fuzz
, repeat viewings will be mandatory. (Scott plays bass for a rock outfit called Sex Bob-omb, and during one battle-of-the-bands segment, I'm pretty sure I missed a bunch of outstanding gags, as I was already laughing so hard at a rival group's set - not one song from which lasts longer than 30 seconds - and its scowling, prepubescent, Asian girl drummer.) Yet I'm more excited to revisit Wright's outing for the chance to again spend time with its delirious collection of second bananas. Cera is outrageously confident in his nelly gaucheness, and Winstead reveals the sort of bewitching gaze and offhanded comic panache that have made stars of far lesser talents, but

Scott Pilgrim
's supporting ensemble features a true embarrassment of riches. If pressed, you may possibly be able to narrow your list of favorites down to a dozen.

We get Mark Webber as Sex Bob-omb's tortured lead vocalist and the continually sublime Alison Pill as its brash, deadpan drummer, and Johnny Simmons as the band's sweetly dense, moon-faced groupie. There's the deliciously tart Anna Kendrick as Scott's sister, and Ellen Wong as the high-schooler he mistakenly romances, and Aubrey Plaza as the tough-talking barista unfazed by Scott's woe-is-me act. (A black box pops onscreen and covers her lips during the girl's every bleeped-out dropping of the F-bomb, leading Scott to ask, "How are you doing that with your mouth?") Brie Larson shows up as Scott's angry ex and Mae Whitman (*Arr ested Development*
's Ann Veal!) appears as
Ramona's
angry
ex, and Whitman is just one member of the jilted-lover septet that includes the hysterical Nelson Franklin, Chris Evans, Brandon Routh, and a peerlessly slimy/silly Jason Schwartzman.

Culkin may earn best-in-show honors, but all of these others - and several more besides - definitely give him a run for his money. *Your* money, meanwhile, proves intensely well-spent at *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World*, an exuberant and wonderfully smart comedy that doesn't look, sound, or feel quite like anything you've ever experienced before. It's like a revved-up Robert Altman movie on helium, and, fittingly, delivers a high that you don't want to come down from.

THE EXPENDABLES

Sylvester Stallone is where irony goes to die, and it dies many small deaths in *The Expendables*, director/co-writer/monolith Stallone's homage to every steroid-enhanced action flick from the 1980s that you likely never want to see, or even think about, again. Yet even as someone who scrupulously avoided such titles as *Cobra*, *Red Scorpion,* and *Raw Deal* 20-plus years ago, I still had enough of a guilty fondness for the trashy, period *oeuvres* of Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, and Dolph Lundgren to be mildly psyched about this bloody blow-'em-up for AARP members, one in which all the genre staples appear to be accounted for: rescue missions, drug runners, frenzied marketplace chases with carts of fruits and vegetables toppling over. And I was prepared to forgive *The Expendables* a lot of its inevitable failings. But there's one failing I simply can't forgive the movie for: It's dull as hell.

I started yawning fairly early, as Stallone's lazy, throw-the-camera-anywhere staging was making the pummeling action scenes incoherent, and continued even through the film's most seemingly surefire sequence, a serio-comic church rendezvous between its auteur, Schwarzenneger, and Willis. (Anticipating laughs with each of their tongue-in-cheek exchanges, Stallone follows the stars' banter with awkwardly lengthy pauses, one of which is *really* awkwar d, when Willis asks the other two if they're "going to start sucking each other's dicks," and Stallone and Schwarzenegger remain thoughtfully silent for an uncomfortably long time.) By the time *Th e Expendables* came to its über-violent yet depressingly underwhelming climax - in which the heroic, droopy-lipped Stallone literally walks through fire to save a damsel in distress - I was so out of my mind with boredom that I'd almost forgotten the momentary fun provided by Lundgren (more alert and polished than he ever was in his heyday), Mickey Rourke, and the grimly enjoyable Jason Statham. I did not, however, forget the movie's hilariously overt subtext, which finds Stallone and Statham exchanging longing looks while the once-and-future Rambo tells the once-and-future Transporter to get over his broken heart already, or the scene in which Statham finally tells off his unfaithful girlfriend. "I'm not perfect," says the sensitive he-man, "but you should have waited for me. I was *worth* it." In more than a few movies, haven't Julia Roberts and Sandra Bullock uttered that exact same sentiment?