Written by Mike Schulz
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LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

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Still, I've seen worse Katherine Heigl rom-coms than *Life as We Know It* – hell, thanks to *Killers*, I've seen worse Katherine Heigl rom-coms in the past *six months* – and am grateful for its numerous small pleasures. Josh Lucas makes for an endearing, courtly romantic rival, Melissa McCarthy is hilarious as a lightly condescending Southern belle, and while no movie should be so stupid as to kill off *Mad Men*'s Christina Hendricks in the opening reel, a few minutes with Hendricks are better than none at all. Events may – surprise! – climax with a frenzied rush to an airport, but at least the payoff *is* surprising; rather than the leads, it's that social worker, played by a wonderfully sharp Sarah Burns, who ends up in tears. And while Heigl is Heigl, which is mostly irritating, and Duhamel is Duhamel, which is mostly innocuous, that baby – or rather, the trio of babies that

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that baby – is amazing, with an adorable habit of cocking her head(s) and smiling at her new guardians with a crinkly squint that suggests, “You have no
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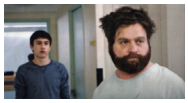


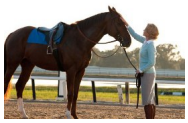
IT’S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY

Based on the well-regarded novel by Ned Vizzini, *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* tells the tale of the clinically depressed, potentially suicidal 16-year-old Craig (Keir Gilchrist), who learns to live, laugh, and love during a five-day stint in a New York mental hospital. Yet before you shout, “Check, please!”, know that this dramatic comedy written and directed by
Sugar’
s Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden is nowhere near as treacly and insufferable as that description indicates. To be sure, you can’t miss its somewhat awkward,
Cuckoo’s-Nest
-meets-
Breakfast-Club
vibe; in one scene that finds Craig and his damaged love interest (Emma Roberts) racing through the ward while avoiding the doctors’ and guards’ notice, several shots are even lifted
directly
from John Hughes’ classic. And there’s no getting around the occasionally sticky sentimentality, the distractingly tame fantasy sequences (the “Under Pressure” routine is particularly timid), Roberts’ beauty amounting to little more than a convenient plot device, and too many of the film’s unbalanced characters – such as Craig’s middle-aged, bed-ridden, Egyptian roommate (Bernard White) – used for cheap poignancy and cheaper laughs. Yet the movie still emerges as a smart, completely engaging exploration of a self-flagellating over-achiever, filmed with enormous empathy for all of its troubled characters, and chock-full of beautifully thoughtful and emotionally incisive moments. (Against all expectation – and certainly against the tenor of the film’s trailers – most of them are provided by a marvelously subtle, haunted Zach Galifianakis.) Gilchrist, who’s wonderful as Toni Colette’s son on
United States of Tara
, may never possess the presence of a true film star, but he's ideally cast as our gawky and

confused hero, and the movie is wise to surround him by an ensemble loaded with talents, none better than the miraculously fine and relaxedly forceful Viola Davis. (
Lost
's Jeremy Davies also shows up, and in a minor casting miracle, portrays one of the film's
least
twitchy figures.) Like Gilchrist's Craig,
It's Kind of a Funny Story
has legitimate problems. Also like Craig, it manages – through a happy and rather inspiring turn of events – to overcome them.

MY SOUL TO TAKE

I truly can't describe the shock I felt in the first 10 minutes of *My Soul to Take*. The prelude wasn't particularly frightening, but I was staggered to realize its demonically possessed psychopath was being played by one of my theatre idols, Broadway-legend-in-the-making Ra
ú
l Esparza. And I just about swallowed my gum when his appearance was followed by the arrivals of equally formidable New York stage actors Harris Yulin and Jessica Hecht; if I hadn't known it was a Wes Craven picture, I would've presumed that
My Soul to Take
was directed, from beyond the grave, by Joseph Papp himself. As a whole, writer/director Craven's movie – which concerns a septet of high schoolers attempting to survive the anniversary of Esparza's (presumed) demise, with one of them perhaps the demon's new host – is nothing more than a moderately clever, surprisingly not-sucky horror trifle. Yet it boasts some astonishing scenes of tension, spectacularly hostile verbal assaults (particularly between Hecht and Emily Mead), and major narrative jolts; as in
Scream
and its first sequel, Craven kills off characters you don't necessarily want to
see
killed, and almost never in the order you expect. The 3D presentation is an underwhelming, completely arbitrary addition to the proceedings, but considering how spiky and enjoyable
My Soul to Take
actually is, suddenly the prospect of next year's
Scream 4
is no longer cause for dread.



SECRETARIAT

Thanks to the good folks at radio station 104.9 FM, Disney, and Rave Motion Pictures Davenport 53, I was able to catch a sneak preview of director Randall Wallace's *Secretariat* two days before its official opening. And I'm awfully glad I did, because the extra 48 hours has allowed me to calm down enough to not tear the film to shreds the way I otherwise might've. My immediate, active loathing of this shamelessly and relentlessly calculated heart-tugger – a movie that doesn't feature even one believable interaction, spontaneous-seeming moment, or imaginative performance (John Malkovich, here, is Malkovich for people who don't *like* Malkovich) – has dulled to a profound yet resigned dislike. Lots of viewers, among them those who whistled and applauded at my screening, will no doubt love the film. For my part, I'm just proud that I opted not to lead this week's reviews with the well-photographed but offensively fraudulent *Secretariat*, because the only-somewhat-jokey headline "Horse Shit" may have been too tempting to pass up.

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