

Shallow Brooks: "How Do You Know" and "Tron: Legacy"

Written by Mike Schulz

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HOW DO YOU KNOW

There's actually quite a bit of good to be said about writer/director James L. Brooks' *How Do You Know*

not least of which is that it's nowhere near as unbearable as Brooks' last offering, 2004's *Spanglish*

. Unfortunately, that's not the same as saying the movie *itself* is good.

Detailing the love triangle that develops between an ousted professional softball player (Reese Witherspoon), a pro-ball-playing lothario (Owen Wilson), and a sensitive businessman under federal investigation (Paul Rudd), the film resembles one of Brooks' 1970s sitcoms, but without the braying laugh track. The performers don't resemble characters so much as vehicles for cutesy tics and heavily scripted "personality," and after obvious punchlines are delivered, there are a few too many seconds of dead air where studio-audience chortles should be; you half-expect the goings-on to be routinely interrupted by commercial breaks. (Most likely for Verizon Wireless or Sprint, as the three leads here – in a beyond-irritating touch – are forever being distracted by their cell phones.) And while the unconvincing, unfunny Jack Nicholson, in the role of Rudd's shifty dad, no longer seems capable of giving a fresh performance, it's Rudd himself who's the saddest disappointment. Used for comic pathos and regular-guy blandness, the actor isn't allowed access to his sneaky, sardonic wit, and comes across, almost throughout, as merely uncomfortable. It's like all those years of Judd Apatow and David Wain movies never

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happened

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But every once in a while, *How Do You Know* surprises you with a touch that borders on the absolutely wonderful. There's an incredibly endearing scene in which Witherspoon, pacing below Rudd's apartment, calls him to ask if she can stop by in a half-hour or so, not realizing that he's watching her, beaming, from the upstairs window. Kathryn Hahn, as Rudd's fretful assistant, shares a late-film, post-birthing conversation with father-of-her-new-baby Lenny Venito that's a minor miracle of acting; the two are so gloriously, believably emotional that they make the rest of the movie feel even tinnier and more synthetic than it did before. And every scene – every *second* – with Owen Wilson is a delight. Given almost nothing to work with, Wilson provides a fantastically funny, inventive portrayal of a guy trying desperately to do the right thing and having no earthly idea how to go about it; the actor is so sweet in his dim, child-like narcissism that you pray for this cad to get the Happily Ever After that Witherspoon, inevitably, will deny him.

How Do You Know

may not be worth much, but it might be worth catching on cable some day for Wilson, for the charming fringe moments, and for the random bits of insight. "Never drink to feel better," says Witherspoon. "Only drink to feel

even

better." Truer words were never spoken.



TRON: LEGACY

My guess is that the target audience for *Tron: Legacy* doesn't really care if the movie is great; they just want it to be *cool*. So let me preface by saying that much of Disney's big-budget opus is indeed cool.

It's cool, for instance, when Sam Flynn (Garrett Hedlund) first enters the futuristic, video-game world created by his father (Jeff Bridges), and, in a high-tech homage to *The Wizard of Oz*, the screen's 2D images immediately pop into 3D. It's cool when Sam leaps into the air and a light

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cycle instantly materializes between his legs, whisking him away at the speed of light. It's cool when Sam whips glowing Frisbees at his CGI opponents and shatters them into millions of tumbling pixels. (The film's Daft Punk soundtrack, by the way, is *consistently* cool.) And it's cool whenever Bridges, riffing on his original *Tron* role from 28 (!) years ago, mutters a very Dude-like, "Cool, man."

There may be other examples, but if there are, I quite likely slept through them. Because director Joseph Kosinski's outing is about the most incoherent, repetitive, and dead-ass boring movie I've sat through in months, the big-screen equivalent of staring at ones and zeroes on your laptop for 125 minutes. God knows the movie has "a look," but pricey visuals don't much matter in a work as narratively senseless and lacking in interior life as this one; how on Earth did it take six screenwriters to compose this dreck? Some vague plot about Grid-locked characters infiltrating our world occasionally rears its head, Hedlund and Bridges squabble about their daddy/son issues, a heavily CGI-ed Bridges shows up as the nefarious Clu, and you spend your time asking all sorts of inappropriate questions, like, "Why is Olivia Wilde's pixelated hottie the only character with any personality?" and "What's with that *papier mâché*-looking hog on Bridges' dining-room table?" I could write the film off as something abjectly Not Meant for Me, but I caught *Tron: Legacy* at a preview hosted by Disney and Rave Motion Pictures Davenport 53, and unlike at their recent previews for *Secretariat* and *Tangled*, not one person in the initially-jazzed crowd applauded at the end. The movie's just uncool, man.

For reviews of *Black Swan* and *The Fighter*, see "[En Pointe, On Edge](#)."