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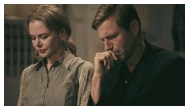

RABBIT HOLE

John Cameron Mitchell’s *Rabbit Hole*, which stars Nicole Kidman and Aaron Eckhart as a married couple coping with the loss of their four-year-old son, is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by screenwriter David Lindsay-Abaire, and there’s probably not much reason for the film to exist. Happily, though, it appears that nobody brought that to the director’s or the author’s attention, because as unnecessary movies go, *Rabbit Hole* is a mostly exemplary one – a stagey yet emotionally incisive, ultimately cathartic experience blessed with the sort of powerhouse cast that could never be assembled, in full, on a stage.

It’s a measure of just *how* expert the cast is that Kidman and Eckhart, who are mighty good here, are perhaps also the least persuasive ones on-screen. The fault isn’t really theirs; Kidman plays her grief-stricken anger and reticence with considerable skill, and Eckhart has many moments of almost startling depth and directness. Yet you’re never more conscious of *Rabbit Hole*’s theatrical origins than in their scenes together, which Mitchell directs with an uncharacteristic lack of imagination. As is common with film adaptations of stage material, much of the movie consists of the standard “opening up” of scenes, with exchanges that previously took place on a single set now occurring in bowling alleys or parks or other, more cinematic locales. But while the visuals in these sequences somewhat obscure the (figurative) proscenium arch that hovers over Lindsay-Abaire’s dialogue, there’s nothing Mitchell can do – or *chooses* to do – with Kidman’s and Eckhart’s confrontations, which have a blandly rote quality, like the antagonistic verbal duels that lead into commercial breaks for made-for-TV weepies. If you didn’t see his name in the credits, you’d never imagine that *Rabbit Hole* was by the director of the dazzlingly frisky and inventive *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* and *Shortbus*.

One thing, however, does link Mitchell’s latest to his previous works – his generous, big-hearted love of performers – and it turns out to be the only thing the film needs to emerge as a moving

and memorable entertainment. (And despite the subject matter, you *will* be entertained; Lindsay-Abaire, with his frequently playful, spiky verbiage, has no apparent interest in making audiences suffer.) In theatrical form,
Rabbit Hole
only features five characters, so it’s to our great fortune that its playwright added sharp, effective roles for such wonderful character actors as Jon Tenney, Giancarlo Esposito, Patricia Kalember, and the effortlessly empathetic Sandra Oh. (Even the splendid Marylouise Burke, recently amazing in the Steppenwolf Theatre’s equally amazing
A Parallelogram,
pops up for a 20-second cameo.) As the deceased boy’s ne’er-do-well aunt, Tammy Blanchard gives her lines an agreeable tartness that hints at a lifetime spent in the role of underachiever. Miles Teller, as the high-schooler who inadvertently caused the tragedy, is marvelously poignant without ever once straining for his effects; the quiet scene in which he shares his guilt with Kidman (“The speed limit was 30, and I may have been going 31 ... or 32 ... I’m not sure … ”) is a heartbreaker for the ages.

And then, in the role of Kidman’s forthright, borderline blowzy mother, there’s Dianne Wiest. Oh, Dianne Wiest. Is there any other screen performer who so wholly lightens a movie’s load merely by showing up? Lindsay-Abaire gives her plenty of rich, meaty dialogue to chew on, but there’s nothing at all show-offy about the actress’ work here; her supremely delicate level-headedness and emotionalism simultaneously lift you up and knock you out. (It can only be Wiest’s delicacy – and the fact that she’s nearly *always* this magnificent – that kept her off the Academy’s Best Supporting Actress short list this year.) *Rabbit Hole* is a first-rate example of exceptional stage material getting exactly the performance gravitas it deserves, and in Dianne Wiest, getting even more than that; she arrives on screen, and it’s as though the darkened cineplex auditorium were suddenly filled with sunshine.

SANCTUM

Since it concerns a team of adventurers facing peril, watery death, and extremely cramped spaces while traversing a series of unexplored caves in Papau New Guinea, director Alister Grierson’s *Sanctum* isn’t for hydrophobes or claustrophobes. Since it features more excruciatingly bad dialogue than anything outside of an Ed Wood picture, it isn’t really for

anyone with half a brain, either. If you were one of the unfortunate few who caught the film over the weekend (and with less than $10 million in grosses despite co-executive producer James Cameron’s name plastered all over its advertising, it truly *was* a “few”), you’ve probably already decided on your favorite bum line among such juicy contenders as “Panic’s the vulture that sits on your shoulder,” “Life’s not a dress rehearsal – you’ve got to seize the day,” and “We’ve got to get out of here! *Now* !” For my money, it was one character’s awed “Since the beginning of time, no human being has ever seen this,” because with all the witless stereotypes wandering about, no human being *still* had. But there’s almost nothing here that *isn’t* laughable; from the tortuously formulaic battling/bonding between an estranged father and son to the ridiculous telegraphing of future deaths (beware the seemingly benign cough) to Ioan Gruffudd’s distractingly, and insanely, weak American accent, the movie’s an unintended howl. And how are the 3D effects, you might be asking? Let’s just say that, as 3D automatically darkens whatever images you’re staring at, its use for a film about cave exploration might *not* have been the smartest decision. Watching *Sanctum* in 3D is like watching the movie with a bag over your head, which, in this film’s case, may have been the preferable way to go.

THE ULTIMATE WAVE: TAHITI

For far better employment of 3D, I direct you instead to the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre’s new 45-minute documentary *The Ultimate Wave: Tahiti*. Now this is what I’m talkin’ about! Following nine-time world surfing champion Kelly Slater as he faces giants off Tahitian shores, director Stephen Low delivers water up your nose and surfboards in the air and fish within easy grabbing distance; we’re also given information about how waves are formed and how carbon dioxide emissions are destroying our lives and such, but I was having so much fun with the movie’s visuals that I barely listened to any of it. Yet while this (expectedly) gorgeously photographed outing is infinitely preferable to *Sanctum* , I’ll admit to still leaving the film slightly underwhelmed. Neither Slater nor Tahitian native Raimana Van Bastolear proves to be a particularly insightful or engaging host – Slater’s

awesome on the waves, less so when he speaks – and repetition sets in awfully early; the sport is cinematic as all-get-out, but really, once you’ve seen one wave with an intrepid surfer hanging 10, you’ve pretty much seen ’em all. And am I alone in being shocked at just how anticlimactic the film is? In the final minutes, after much time spent with Slater on his board, the man walks on the beach, and the narration tells us that he’s still in pursuit of the “demonic wave” – the most dangerous wave on earth. We have every reason to expect that the next scene will, indeed, find Slater rolling on this legend of nature, but instead, the only things that roll are the end credits. What’s the point in titling a film
The Ultimate Wave
if we’re not allowed to
see
one?

THE ROOMMATE

If I had any lingering doubts about Leighton Meester’s talents, even after her charming performance in *Country Strong*, they were immediately erased by the end of *The Roommate*; I’m thinking that anyone who can not only survive, but
thrive
in, crap this deep can do just about anything. Director Christian E. Christiansen’s in-name-only thriller about a ludicrously naïve college freshman (Minka Kelly) and her increasingly psychotic roomie (Meester) is as inept as you’d imagine a
Single White Female
for tweens would be, with the sorts of achingly contrived scare-flick scenarios that inspire you to look at your watch every three minutes, even if you’re not wearing a watch. (When Kelly brings home a darling little kitten named Cuddles, can any good
possibly
come from this?) Yet while the film is mostly unbearable, and squinty-eyed Cam Gigandet continues to be about the most irritating young hunk in modern movies, I’ll be damned if Meester doesn’t pull off her Jennifer Jason Leigh role with aplomb. To be sure, the actress is eventually done in by the god-awful script. But whenever she’s given a halfway decent loony-tunes moment, Meester is wonderfully creepy: gratefully accepting her new friend’s gift of earrings and putting them through her lobes, even though her ears aren’t pierced; splattering gasoline on a lascivious station attendant and flicking her Zippo; enticing Billy Zane’s professor, and immediately entrapping him in a sexual-harassment claim. (Hey, it’s Billy Zane. He

deserves it.)
The Roommate
is terrible, but at least Leighton Meester is terribly enjoyable in it, and when the inevitable remake of
Fatal Attraction
gets green-lighted – probably within minutes – I’m hoping some shrewd producer thinks to give her a call.