

Goofs: "Big Momma's House," "Shanghai Noon," and "Road Trip"

Written by Mike Schulz

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BIG MOMMA'S HOUSE, SHANGHAI NOON, and ROAD TRIP

First, the good news: the new Martin Lawrence comedy, *Big Momma's House*, is nowhere near as terrible as *Mrs. Doubtfire*

, his last film to put its comic star in prosthetic drag for most of its length. The bad news, as you might have expected, is that the movie *still* isn't very good.

Lawrence plays an FBI agent who, for reasons too laborious to get into, must pose as an elderly, incredibly obese Southern matron, in order to retrieve two million dollars from the woman's granddaughter (Nia Long), who it appears has stolen it from her murderous thief of a beau (Terrence Howard). With *Big Momma's House* and the recently-released *Shanghai Noon* and *Road Trip*

, and have obviously entered Summer Comedy movie season, where Hollywood's farcical set-ups are only slightly more believable than the presence of talking dinosaurs and the sight of

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terrorists owning, and eventually donning, perfect Tom Cruise masks.

Martin Lawrence is all performer, by which I mean he doesn't seem to have a relaxed bone in his body. He's constantly *on*, and while his edgy, hyper-active persona is undeniably lively, it wears thin awfully fast. That's why it's something of a shock that, in the role of the faux Big Momma, he's actually able to change his rhythms, and delve into something calmer, and sweeter, too. Sure, there are the token "laughs" generated by the sight of Momma playing two-on-two basketball, shaking with religious fervor in church, and whumping the ass of anyone who stands in "her" way. But in Lawrence's quieter scenes with Long, and Jacsha Washington as her son, he seem to be on to a type of comedy usually alien to him – listening and responding *in character* and still making it amusing. He also, thankfully, avoids the sentimental, squishy streak that so often mars the allegedly "heartwarming" comedies of Robin Williams; Lawrence is always a little on top of the material, never basking in its sentimentality, and unlike Williams, you never feel embarrassed for him.

You can forgive a lot in the film: the hokiness of the set-up, the fact that the new "Big Momma" manages to fool over people she's lived with for years about her "new look," the jokey, one-dimensional crew of nosy neighbors. What you can't forgive is that the movie itself just isn't very funny (by now, Lawrence has gotten more than enough mileage out of his trademark "Damn!"), or that it shamelessly rips off the plotting of *Kindergarten Cop* (not to mention dozens of other films), or that the film's structure and editing are so bizarre that you never, with one videotaped exception, see the bad guy doing anything remotely evil (though Howard glowers impressively). Raja Gosnell is credited as the director, but that's a little too generous – it doesn't appear that there *was* a director. By the time you've gotten to the film's protracted finale, with both Mommas narrowly missing each other as they run in and out of rooms, you're just grateful that it's all coming to a close; even the presences of the inventive Paul Giamatti and the gifted and astonishingly beautiful Nia Long don't add up to much.

Big Momma's House

isn't a bomb, exactly, but it's depressingly familiar and unsurprising – it's a Summer Comedy, all right.



So is *Shanghai Noon*, but at least this one has a fair degree of charm, and some terrific fight choreography courtesy of the ever-ingratiating Jackie Chan. A fish-out-of-water buddy comedy, Tom Dey's film stars Chan as a Chinese imperial guard who travels to the wild west to rescue a kidnapped princess (Lucy Liu), with the aid of a rather philosophical train robber played by Owen Wilson, who appears slightly stoned because... well... that's how Wilson

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always

plays his characters.

As usual, Wilson's hiiper-than-thou attitude is a drain on the movie, and the movie's humor is utterly predictable and sometimes overtly racist. (There's a two-word punchline that manages to be offensive to both Native Americans and Semites without being the slightest bit funny.) What keeps it bearable is Chan's lightness of touch and willingness to be a slapsticky sap; this is probably his most entertaining, confident American star turn to date. And even as he enters middle age, you can get enormous enjoyment out of his martial-arts moves – this man doesn't need fancy editing; even while moving a wee bit slower than in his acclaimed “chop-socky” films of years past, he's a special effect all by himself. Add to this a couple of terrific supporting performances by Liu (it's a relief seeing her show more variety than she's allowed on TV's *Ally McBeal*

and in films like

Play It to the Bone

and

Payback

) and an almost unrecognizable Xander Berkeley, and you have decent, lighthearted action-comedy fare, one of the three or maybe four recent movies that you can view with a smile on your face.



Meanwhile, I don't think I smiled *once* at the antics on display in Todd Phillips' *Road Trip*. In it, a group of four college students travel cross country in an attempt to keep an incriminating videotape out of the hands of one of their girlfriends. Along the way, they get involved in a series of misadventures in the vein of

American Pie

and

There's Something About Mary

, which is a polite way of saying that the film's gags involve all sorts of sexual and scatological yuckiness, and you'll get at least one major sequence involving semen (the comedic fluid of choice in the past three years).

As a rule, I have nothing against any of this; deliberate crudeness can often be riotous. But at least in *Pie* and *Mary*, the gross gags had *something* to do with the storyline, and made sense given the characters and circumstances. In

Road Trip

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, there

are

no characters, just character sketches, and the disgusting moments have nothing to do with the movie proper; they're put in strictly to rile the audience (which wouldn't, in itself, be bad if the gags were actually

funny

). The movie grows more and more monotonous and desperate as it progresses, much like its co-star Tom Green (who gives Pauly Shore and

The Real World

strong competition in the worst-thing-to-ever-come-from-MTV contest). Saddest of all, the movie wastes the very real talents of Breckin Meyer; after years of scoring in supporting roles (

Clueless, 54,

and especially

Go

), he's finally rewarded with a lead, and it's in this completely unfunny, uninspired, worthless mess. Maybe next summer, Breckin.