

## War and Priest: "Keeping the Faith" and "U-571"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 26 April 2000 06:00

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### **KEEPING THE FAITH**

If you've seen the trailer for *Keeping the Faith* – a slapsticky montage featuring the sight of Edward Norton, as a priest, setting his clerical robe on fire (which he extinguishes by leaping into holy water), and Ben Stiller, as a rabbi, punching a woman in the stomach – you might be shocked at the sweetness and earnestness of the movie itself. The film's trailer is one of the biggest pieces of false advertising in recent movies.

Those “screwball” moments are in the film, all right, but they're tossed off as quick, forgettable chuckles in a movie that's interested in more than that – and a movie that's *much* funnier than its previews would lead you to believe.

#### *Keeping the Faith*

, directed by Norton himself with a first-rate screenplay by Stuart Blumberg, is a joy pretty much from start to finish, a film that transcends the gimmickry of its set-up with energy, good humor, and just a dash of seriousness.

At the beginning, Norton's priest, Brian, enters a New York bar and dives into a sloshed retelling of his woes involving his best friend Jake (Stiller), and Anna (Jenna Elfman) – the woman they both love – to a bartender (the wonderfully incredulous Brian George). “A priest and a rabbi?”

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the bartender asks. "Haven't I heard this one?" That small, perfectly appropriate joke is the key to the movie's success. Establishing the movie's high-concept idea – A priest and a rabbi in love with the same woman! Can you *stand* it?! – as fairly ridiculous gives the film breathing room; the filmmakers and performers are then free to take the idea, and the characters, to surprising depths. Anna, who's Brian's and Jake's childhood pal, shows up for a job in New York and has the men falling for her, but their professions have made the crush rather hard to take. Brian, obviously, has his vow of celibacy to contend with, but Jake has problems of his own – his congregation expects him to marry within his faith, and Anna is as WASP-ish as can be.

This is Norton's filmmaking debut, and a few bits are overdirected – the scenes of Brian and Jake walking the streets like "regular guys" are a little forced, and so are several segments in Jake's synagogue, where pushy mothers try to foist their single daughters on him. But Norton gets the big moments exactly right, the ones involving the leads' friendship and their dedication to their faiths, and all of the ones involving Jenna Elfman. Working with much better material than she ever gets on *Dharma & Greg*, Elfman is ready to be a major force in movies. (She's already been the best thing in movies like *Can't Hardly Wait* and *EdT* V.)

She's playing an extremely focused and complicated woman, which seems right for her, and she's so smart and beautiful and funny that the whole movie would fail without her radiance; it's completely believable that this priest and this rabbi would lose it over her. (You'll have to fight hard to *not* smile when she's onscreen.)

As a performer, Norton is just about perfect, too. The joy Brian takes in his religious calling is palpable, as is his love for Anna and Jake, and when his faith is tested, you feel exactly how and why it's tearing him up. Stiller is a little too facile a performer to bring out the full range of emotions Jake should display, but he's a terrifically confident funnyman, and his scenes with Norton have an alert rhythm. Their banter is sensational, particularly when Brian does a *Rain Man* riff, and they have the shared humor that best friends often have. The teamwork between Norton and Stiller is just about flawless; you *feel* that they've been friends since childhood, which makes their eventual squabbles surprisingly poignant.

*Keeping the Faith* runs a bit long – it could have used a little trimming, especially of the scenes with Jake's superiors wondering what they're going to do with this live-wire rabbi – but it's as enjoyable a romantic comedy as one could hope for, with terrific dialogue, marvelous leads, and

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nifty character turns by the likes of Anne Bancroft and Milos Forman (who directed Norton in *The People Vs. Larry Flynt*

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### ***U-571***

*U-571* is about as generic and unmemorable as an action drama can get, but it's been five years since we've had a big, claustrophobia-and-mutiny-on-a-submarine flick (1995's *Crimson Tide*

), so it'll probably be a hit. It also has some magnificent sound effects, whiplash editing, and realistic art direction, so it might be a *big*

hit. But I can't be alone in thinking that it's completely devoid of personality, with characters so interchangeable that, when someone dies, you're never quite sure

*which*

one died, and situations so retrograde that you know where it's going way before it gets there.

In 1997's crackling Kurt Russell movie *Breakdown*, director Jonathan Mostow took a familiar genre concept and made it unfailingly entertaining (and, at 93 minutes, lightning-paced). Here, Mostow seems to be relying on the concept to do all the work for him; it feels old-hat, and more than a little dull.

Admittedly, the concept itself works: In World War II, an American sub takes over a German sub containing the Enigma machine, which will allow them to break German codes. The problem is, once in German waters with a sub that's barely afloat and a crew that, with one exception, can't read or speak German, how do they get out? Unfortunately, for a film with such a seemingly unsinkable premise (pun intended), *U-571* fails to deliver much surprise. This is due, in part, to the colorless cast: Matthew McConaughey, in the lead, wavers between not showing any facial expressions and showing far too many – it's a dreadful performance – and character actors like Bill Paxton, David Keith, and even the great Harvey Keitel seem drained of life. But it's mostly

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due to the by-the-numbers scripting and clichéd, contrived plotting, and in Mostow being more interested in achieving bitchin' sound effects than telling a story that makes narrative sense. I'd give more specific examples if the whole of *U-571* didn't vanish from my mind minutes after seeing it; it may only be April, but the wave of senseless, character-free, ultra-loud summer action flicks appears to be starting already.