

Mississippi Yearning: "The Help" and "Glee: The 3D Concert Movie"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 14 August 2011 12:16

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THE HELP

Based on Kathryn Stockett's much-loved bestseller, *The Help* concerns the tenuous relationships between black domestic workers and their privileged white employers in early-'60s Mississippi, and it's a fairly obvious movie, with director Tate Taylor opting for broad brushstrokes over subtlety, and the occasionally wrenching drama sitting, rather uncomfortably, alongside klutzy jokiness. Yet offhand, I can't think of another popular entertainment whose flaws matter less than this film's, because everything that's lacking in the picture is more than made up for in the fearless, emotionally precise, and oftentimes devastating portrayals of Taylor's cast.

The Help is easy to complain about, but all it takes is one of the magnificent Viola Davis' fierce, tearful stares – or a blast of Octavia Spencer's anger, or a flash of Emma Stone's heartbreak, or a burst of Jessica Chastain's joy – to make your complaints feel positively moot.

That the talents here are as excellent as they are is both heartening and deeply surprising, considering that so many of them are playing variants on perhaps the least playable of female screen stereotypes: the blithely racist Southern socialite whose daily routine seems to consist solely of attending luncheons and bridge club, and making condescending remarks – with a smile, of course – about “the help.” Yet while there may be no way to enact this caricature *except* as a perpetually, fraudulently cheerful zombie with hate in her eyes, Bryce Dallas Howard, Ahna O'Reilly, and Allison Janney, among others, invest these stock figures with enough genuine meanness and panic and fear to transcend their characters' sketchiness. (Howard's

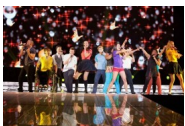
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performance is especially brave; she attacks her monstrous bigot with so much wicked enthusiasm that it might be years before audiences can again watch the actress without wanting to throttle her.) And the long-suffering-servant role, while far less obnoxious, is also an instantly recognizable cliché, but try telling that to Spencer, whose razor-sharp comic timing underscores her Minny Jackson's furious intelligence, or to Cicely Tyson, who exudes wounded fragility and intense pride in just a few minutes of screen time.

The Help is chockablock with performers who breathe fresh, invigorating life into timeworn types: Stone, delivering composed sanity and resplendent sass as enlightened author Skeeter Phelan; Chastain, her radiantly blowsy daffiness offset by a beaten-up melancholy; Sissy Spacek, whose feisty, hilarious matriarch will lose what's left of her marbles at her convenience, thank you very much. Meanwhile, if the film belongs to anyone, it belongs to Davis, and it's hard to fathom an actor more deserving. For those in thrall to her gifts, seeing Davis in a rich, expansive film role feels like the fulfillment of a long-gestating promise, and she's so superb as the tireless domestic Aibileen Clark – her humor, misery, and scorn occasionally bubbling through what has to be an inscrutable façade – that the staggering difficulty behind her seemingly simple effects could easily go unnoticed. I'm betting it won't be, though. While it caters to its audience in somewhat predictable ways, *The Help* is a gloriously performed audience-pleaser that you'll likely be hearing about for weeks. Thanks to Davis, those weeks should handily continue all the way to February's Academy Awards ceremony.



GLEE: THE 3D CONCERT MOVIE

As with *The Help*, it's pretty easy to see what's wrong with *Glee: The 3D Concert Movie* – though this particular movie has a lot more wrong with it than

The Help

does. Incorporating footage from two nights of this year's “

Glee

Live! In Concert” tour, director Kevin Tancharoen's outing is a structurally messy, frequently maddening explosion of pop-centric self-aggrandizement. And while those unfamiliar with the TV series will likely be lost (“Why is the kid in the wheelchair now doing ‘The Safety Dance’? Why is Gwyneth Paltrow singing Cee Lo Green? Why is Gwyneth Paltrow even

here

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?”), it’s easy to imagine any viewer of the film being annoyed by the screechy raves from gushing fans, awkwardly “in character” backstage chatter, and momentum-stalling testimonials from three youths whose lives, they claim, have been forever changed by the Fox phenomenon.

I couldn’t care less, though; as a major, if sometimes embarrassed, fan of both *Glee* and its cast, I had a

ball

at this thing. The haters are gonna hate, and they have every right – and, here, every *reason* –

to. Yet as someone who could contentedly watch Lea Michele belt out “Don’t Rain on My Parade,” Harry Shum Jr. perform gravity- and human-biology-defying moves, or Naya Rivera do

anything

for hours on end, my

Glee: The 3D Concert Movie

dough was dough incredibly well-spent. In the end, it’s really nothing more than an 80-minute commercial for itself. But in the age of Biebermania, isn’t a film that documents a crowd of thousands – most of them under 18 – cheering a rendition of Judy Garland’s and Barbra Streisand’s famed “Happy Days Are Here Again/Get Happy” duet at least a

little

refreshing?

For reviews of Final Destination 5 and 30 Minutes or Less, see "[Fate Accompli](#)."

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