

Written by Mike Schulz
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DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

When a horror movie is really working, you tend to feel a tightening in the gut – a means of preventing you from audibly reacting to the intensity. When a horror movie is really *not* working, at least at the cineplex, you also tend to feel this clenching of the stomach muscles, but not because you're trying to avoid screaming. It's because you're trying to avoid *laughing*

.

Which brings me to director Troy Nixey's *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, a mostly serious-minded scare flick that keeps your innards in knots almost throughout, though rarely due to on-screen tension. Based on a famed 1973 TV movie – one that reportedly scared the bejeezus out of this remake's producer and co-screenwriter, Guillermo del Toro – the film finds architect Guy Pearce, girlfriend Katie Holmes, and young daughter Bailee Madison residing in a newly renovated mansion, one housing legions of skittish, toothy gnomes hoping to make a meal of the girl. With their clawed feet racing along hardwood floors and their insinuating whispers of “*Come play with us-s-s*

” –

like

The Shining

's deceased tots masquerading as Gremlins – these barely visible beasties deliver a few satisfying early shivers, plus an outstanding “Boo!” effect when Madison, unwisely, goes searching for one beneath her bedspread. Yet that welcome creep-out also marks the beginning

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of the end, because once we've actually seen one of these computer-generated freaks in closeup, they stop being scary, and so, too, does

Don't Be Afraid of the Dark

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It does, however, grow positively hysterical, and I credit the performers for getting through this thing with straight faces, because Lord knows *I did*
n't. Some of the movie's touches, such as the shifty-eyed, growling groundskeeper (Jack Thompson) who obviously knows more than he's revealing, seem almost designed as genre in-jokes, and one sequence – in which the miniature monsters attempt to steal an incriminating Polaroid – even seems directed as horror *slapstick*

. But its rogue comic moments notwithstanding, almost nothing about the presentation suggests an awareness of how ridiculous it is. From Pearce's stunningly obtuse indifference to Holmes' avowals not to let the child be left alone (while doing nothing

but

leaving her alone) to the demons' ever-more-vocal, ever-more-

obvious

declarations about their nefarious plans ("What do you want?!" "

We want YOU!!!

"), the film continually trades one howler for another, and its lapses in logic are oftentimes hilariously stupefying. (Why, when Holmes is advised to immediately get the kid out of the house and to learn more about the gnomes at the library, does she go to the library

first

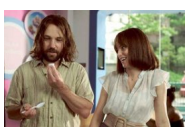
? Why does Pearce continue to disbelieve in the gnomes' presence when one has been crushed to death between a pair of bookshelves

directly in front of him

?) I won't pretend I didn't have fun at

Don't Be Afraid of the Dark.

Yet considering the earnestness of the enterprise, it can't be the sort of fun Nixey and del Toro were aiming for; the film may provide loads of unintentional giggles, but it still puts the "err" in "terrifying."



OUR IDIOT BROTHER

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I'd say that the strongest elements of director Jesse Peretz's *Our Idiot Brother* have nothing to do with its plot, but that might suggest there

is
a plot. In actuality, there's just a conceit: After a stint in prison, Paul Rudd's Ned – a cheerful, well-meaning, obsessively truth-telling naïf – spends time at the homes of his unhappy sisters (Elizabeth Banks, Emily Mortimer, and Zooey Deschanel), and his utter guilelessness and slacker-hipster wisdom eventually turn them into better people. (The end.) You don't have to be naturally averse to shaggy, aimless, acoustic-guitar-laden indie comedies to be put off by this one's self-satisfied cuteness and relentless stereotyping; despite the considerable talents of the comediennes playing them, Ned's three sisters have exactly three personality traits between them, and poor Steve Coogan, as Mortimer's unfaithful husband, has nothing to play but loutishness. Yet considering it's little more than a moderately risqué, big-screen take on that *Brady Bunch*

episode in which Cindy can't stop snitching, Peretz's outing (with a script by his sister Evgenia Peretz and David Schisgall) is easy enough to sit through. There are lovely, funny bits involving Rashida Jones, Adam Scott, Kathryn Hahn, Sterling Brown, Shirley Knight, and T.J. Miller, and with his exquisite timing and Jeff Lebowsky-lite friendliness, Rudd is wonderful throughout. At its best, which is basically any time Rudd appears to be improvising alongside his equally game acting partners,

Our Idiot Brother

generates a happily mellow, slightly zonked buzz. But like the bag of weed that lands Ned in the clink, it also inspires a serious case of the munchies, leaving you desperately hungry for an actual

movie

.



SHARKS 3D

Narrated by a turtle and featuring an opening half (of a 40-minute running length) devoted to the antics of jellyfish, mantises, swordfish, sardines, dolphins, sea lions, and such, I felt that the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre's *Sharks 3D*, for a long while, seemed oddly titled, as *Sharks ? 3D*

It much more appropriate. Eventually, though, the creatures do show up, and while director

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Jean-Jacques Mantello's 2004 documentary spends much time detailing how dangerous they can be – while simultaneously assuring children that most of them aren't to be feared – the ones the camera lovingly glides beside appear tame in the extreme; barring a brief feeding frenzy on a single fish, the shark footage here suggests a G-rated

Jaws

on lithium. Yet I was hardly expecting (despite silently wanting) mass aquatic carnage in an IMAX edu-tainment designed for grade-schoolers, and for what it is,

Sharks 3D

is a smooth and gracefully shot underwater exploration, featuring a playful score, a few truly remarkable exploitations of 3D – you'll have to restrain yourself from swatting those jellyfish away from your eyes – and amusingly cornball voice-over commentary courtesy of Geoffrey Bateman. Prior to the sharks' arrival, his amiable sea turtle provides some dish on the lives of his oceanic brethren, and tells us, "Fish only have three concerns: finding their next meal, not being somebody

else's

next meal, and third ... well ... ask your parents." Good luck with that one, kids. I asked

my

parents, and they ain't talkin'.

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