



## **MONEYBALL**

On paper, the casting of Brad Pitt as Oakland A's General Manager Billy Beane in *Moneyball* must have seemed inspired. On screen, it's so, so much better than that. Pitt has, of course, given many wonderful performances over the past two decades (and just as many blandly acceptable or downright dreary ones). But to my mind, his Billy Beane – driven, hopeful, cocky, incensed, funny, tender, and smart as hell – is the actor's first chance to employ

*all* of his gifts in the service of an emotionally expansive, fully shaped character, and Pitt's beautiful and generous work here is truly a sight to behold. Director Bennett Miller's last feature film was his 2005 debut

*Capote*

, which netted Philip Seymour Hoffman a Best Actor Oscar. With

*Moneyball*

, Miller might find himself batting 2-for-2 for his stars in that category.

Based on a celebrated nonfiction by Michael Lewis, the movie was written by Oscar-fêted screenwriters Steven Zaillian and Aaron Sorkin (with a story by Stan Chervin), and perhaps only authors as talented as they are could have made the subject of statistical analysis this entertaining, and this *moving*. In many ways, *Moneyball* is a traditional triumph-of-the-underdog sports flick, with Pitt's Beane, against much opposition, gradually turning a team of misfit players into champs. (The majority of the film is set during the 2002 season, when the A's won a borderline-miraculous 20 consecutive games.) Yet Miller's and his writers' triumph is less about baseball than the *business* of baseball – primarily the (at the time) radical notion of sabermetrics, a number-crunching analysis capable of finding enormous cost-saving and game-winning value in ballplayers thought to have little or no professional value. When

*Moneyball*

isn't on the field, it's generally in the offices of Beane and his newly hired assistant Peter Brand (Jonah Hill), a timid, incredibly bright Yale graduate who converts Beane to the sabermetrics cause. And in the almost comically perfect pairing of Pitt and Hill, riffing together with the skill and grace of seasoned jazz musicians, Miller's outing reveals the thrill of the victories

*behind*

the victories, earned through a careful balance of intuition and solid facts. (The scene of Beane and Brand negotiating a trade agreement through callers on several phone lines is particularly cogent and exhilaratingly well-executed.)

## Contract Highs: "Moneyball," "Killer Elite," and "Abduction"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 25 September 2011 11:32

---

Scene by scene, nothing in *Moneyball* – not even the *de rigueur* Big Game, which lands 20 minutes before the picture's actual end – feels at all melodramatic or phony. From Beane's curt exchanges with A's manager Art Howe (a marvelously blunt Philip Seymour Hoffman), with their currents of intense hostility and mutual loathing, to Beane's playful, delicate rapport with his pre-teen daughter (a wondrously charming Kerris Dorsey), you wholly believe in every on-screen moment here, and the cast is unerringly fine. (Chris Pratt, terrific on TV's *Parks & Recreation*

, breaks your heart with just a few simple readings and reaction shots, and the all-but-unrecognizable Arliss Howard is so spectacularly naturalistic in his cameo as Red Sox owner John Henry that my friend and I were convinced that Miller had hired an untrained actor for the role, albeit an exceptionally gifted one.)

Yet for all of its strengths – and Wally Pfister's cinematography and Christopher Tellefsen's editing have to count as major ones – this best-film-of-2011-to-date likely wouldn't be the best film of 2011 to date without Brad Pitt. Like Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire* or Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*

,  
*Moneyball*

's lead delivers capitalized Movie-Star Acting of the highest caliber here; the role seems to fit the performer as snugly as a glove, but it's also a wonderful showcase for all the quirky little bursts of personality and eccentricity and soulfulness that make Pitt Pitt. (He's as capable of cracking you up with a silly, elbow-thrusting waddle down a hallway as he is of making you teary-eyed with Beane's subtly wrenching reaction to the A's 20th victory.) I couldn't possibly love Pitt's portrayal more, and I'm not sure I could love Miller's film more, either. Baseball is the great American pasttime;

*Moneyball*

is a great American movie.



**KILLER ELITE**

Beginning with its 1981 setting, which means there won't be any stolen microchips or frenzied

## Contract Highs: "Moneyball," "Killer Elite," and "Abduction"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 25 September 2011 11:32

---

cell-phone conversations to contend with, there's a lot that's initially promising about the Jason Statham thriller *Killer Elite*. Best of all, to be sure, is that director Gary McKendry's tale of warring special operatives and hired assassins actually casts the brawny, ever-enjoyable star opposite others who, like him, can actually act, among them Robert De Niro (looser and more likable than he's been in ages), Clive Owen, and *Lost*'s Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje. But barring a few snazzy set pieces – including a particularly impressive one in which Statham kicks the crap out of two guys

*while tied to a chair* –

the latest disappointment on its lead's résumé is an achingly protracted and grimly familiar genre outing, filled with stoic dialogue and characters of no discernible interest. The film's stunt team deserves an ovation, but everything else about

*Killer Elite*

barely merits a shrug, and the droning monotony of most of the shoot-outs and fistfights is wearying in the extreme; it's an action pic that appears to have been helmed by a metronome.



### **ABDUCTION**

See Taylor Lautner. See Taylor run. See Taylor jump. See Taylor pose. (And pose. And pose.) See Taylor attempt to be an action star in director John Singleton's latest misfire. See Taylor fail. See Taylor stare blankly when trying for intensity. See Taylor stare blankly when trying for sincerity. See Taylor scrunch up his face a little when trying for confusion. (See the whole *audience* |

looking confused.) See Maria Bello kick a bit of tail as Taylor's "mom." See Alfred Molina offer a bit of professionalism as an untrustworthy CIA agent. See Sigourney Weaver looking thoroughly humiliated. See a Eurotrash villain threaten to kill all of Taylor's Facebook friends. (See an auditorium of viewers howling with laughter.) See a wannabe star vehicle so ass-kissy and contrived and mind-numbingly stupid that it might just be a new camp classic. See

*Abduction*

. But see it at your own risk.

## Contract Highs: "Moneyball," "Killer Elite," and "Abduction"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 25 September 2011 11:32

---

Follow Mike on Twitter at [Twitter.com/MikeSchulzNow](https://twitter.com/MikeSchulzNow).