

Two Left Feet: “Footloose,” “The Thing,” and “The Big Year”

Written by Mike Schulz

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FOOTLOOSE

It was probably inevitable that Paramount would get around to remaking *Footloose*, and once it did, the studio probably could've done worse than to hire director Craig Brewer for the job, despite a filmography (*Hustle & Flow*, *Black Snake Moan*) not exactly bursting with lighthearted confectionary fare. Yet considering that 27 years have passed since Kevin Bacon first screamed, “Let’s *da-a-a-ance!!!*” to a grain mill full of eager young hoofers, shouldn’t this new *Footloose* have been... I dunno... at least a *slight* improvement on the original?

In truth, though, Brewer’s outing appears so completely beholden to its predecessor that everything that was borderline-crummy about Herbert Ross’s 1984 hit – its melodramatic storyline, its forced sincerity, its haphazardly-edited dance sequences – is *still* borderline-crummy. And in general, the few moments of wit on display here are only witty because they’re direct nods to the first film, as when a team of pre-teen girls teaches a gawky high-schooler to boogie by shimmying along to “Let’s Hear It for the Boy.” (Just like in Ross’s offering, this dance-lesson montage, with the great Miles Teller substituting for the late, great Chris Penn, is the best scene in the movie.)

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otloose –

either

of them, really – is too innocuous to get in a dither about. But this Bacon-free version seems to hold the original in such high esteem that the basic material hasn’t been re-imagined in the slightest, and for the film to work in 2011, it desperately needed to be. One of Brewer’s rare examples of revisionism is to have the feisty Sarah Jessica Parker character played, now, by a feisty young Black woman (Ziah Colon), yet you’ll notice that she sports the exact same Sarah Jessica Parker hairdo.

For those too young to have seen *Footloose*’s previous incarnation on the big screen, allow me to assure you that yes, we all *did* realize how stupid its plot about The Town That Banned Dancing actually was. (I’ll never forget my high school friend’s observation, as we left the theatre, that the only way the movie could’ve made any sense was if it had been set in Amish country.) The film, though, at least had some snap and momentum and what many of us thought was a kick-ass pop soundtrack, plus just enough flashes of legitimately joyous dancing to leave you with a lift; you could roll your eyes throughout and still admit to having a pretty excellent time.

In Brewer’s take, however, nearly every scene seems to exude a rather dispiriting, going-through-the-motions vibe, as though the movie wasn’t made for 2011 audiences so much as 1984 audiences who want to relive their 1984 experience. Ah, here’s the scene where Ren (Kenny Wormald) first eyes Ariel (Julianne Hough), the beautiful, damaged preacher’s daughter! Ah, here’s the scene where Ren courts the hatred of Ariel’s bruiser boyfriend (Patrick John Flueger)! Ah, here’s the scene where Ren dances his troubles away through a pissed-off, and hilariously acrobatic, solo routine! I’m not sure what newbies will take from all of this, but barring some random highlights – among them the peppy opening-credits sequence (another homage to Ross’s version), the portrayals of Ray McKinnon and Kim Dickens as Ren’s uncle and aunt, and absolutely everything Miles Teller says and does – I felt precious little during this *Footloose* except nostalgia. And that’s hardly the sensation that a modern, purportedly “energetic” dance movie should ever leave audiences with.

Brewer has a real eye for his film’s Georgia locales, and even comes through with some occasionally superb compositions, none better than when Ren and Ariel share their first kiss, and their silhouettes against the sunset form, for just a second, the perfect image of a heart. That romantic tableau would’ve no doubt meant more, though, had we any particular feeling for those *doing* the kissing. But based on the evidence here, and despite moving reasonably well (especially with his editor’s assistance), Wormald appears to be where screen charisma goes to die – he’s like an airbrushed Michael Cera without the comic talent – and all Hough left me with was the belief that she needs to be cast as Jennifer Aniston’s daughter *stat*. To say

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they’re not enough to replace the memories of Bacon and Lori Singer, or even to be mentioned in the same breath as them, is a mild understatement, and sadly, almost everything in this *Footloose*

is mild in the extreme. When, late in the film, Dennis Quaid’s preacher explains the town’s ban on dancing by saying that it was lurid and suggestive music that led to the deaths of five local youths, including his son, it sounds vaguely silly. But then you remember that, in the film’s prelude, we actually

heard

what music the kids were listening to before their fatal accident: a Blake Shelton rendition of Kenny Loggins’ original “Footloose.” Say what you will about the artists’ discographies, but only in a movie as tepid as this one could a Shelton cover of Loggins ever be considered lurid

or

suggestive.



THE THING

Set in 1982, the year that John Carpenter’s gross-out classic *The Thing* was first released, director Matthijs van Heijningen Jr.’s identically titled prequel introduces us to heroine Mary Elizabeth Winstead while her scientist is listening to Men at Work’s “Who Can It Be Now” on the radio. For those who know the movie’s plot, that’s an

outstanding

joke, and one that quickly gets you thinking that this new

Thing

might wind up a better, smarter horror flick than the one you’re expecting. And it is. It’s just not, in the end, as good or as smart as you want it to be.

To be sure, there are some clever, well-sustained scare sequences in this latest tale of an alien life form that masquerades as human while knocking off an Antarctic research crew; the protracted scene in which the victims-to-be check each other’s dental work for fillings (the creature not being able to replicate metal) is particularly nerve-racking. Yet while van Heijningen handles the tension and the cast with aplomb, there’s not much he can do to enliven the hopelessly expository dialogue – Winstead is forever telling her companions exactly how and why the alien does what it does, as if her character had somehow committed Carpenter’s film to

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memory – or the sadly predictable narrative arc. (If the too-obvious gold earring worn by Joel Edgerton’s character doesn’t immediately set off warning bells, you should turn in your horror-aficionado card.) And while there’s a fairly satisfying amount of splatter onscreen, the sad truth is that none of it is nearly as memorable, or as nausea-inducing, as the animatronic visuals from 1982, back before the “miracle” of CGI took much of the tangibility out of special effects; the effects here may be gory, but they sure aren’t special. Even after not seeing Carpenter’s offering in more than two decades, I can still picture that disembodied head skittering along the floor while an understandably agog David Clennon says, “You’ve gotta be fucking *kidding* me.” I saw the new *The Thing* just two days ago, and its images have all but completely evaporated.



THE BIG YEAR

The Big Year, which concerns the exploits of a trio of competitive birding enthusiasts, is the latest movie by David Frankel, the director of *Marley & Me*. It’s also a movie for audiences who thought that

Marley & Me

was a little too gritty and lifelike for their tastes. I have no doubt that, as a recreational pursuit, the art of birding can be enormously fulfilling. But I found absolutely nothing fulfilling about this (too-)genial family comedy that trades any hint of real-world experience for ho-hum slapstick, incessant voice-over narration, maudlin sentiment, and an utter refusal to let us discover the mystery and beauty of avian life for ourselves. (Eyeing a great spotted woodpecker, one character calls the bird “nothing short of a miracle,” a point pounded home through the overtly majestic music and angelic choir on the soundtrack.) A few welcome supporting performers help make it all somewhat less tiresome, among them Anjelica Huston, JoBeth Williams, Rosamund Pike, Rashida Jones, Jim Parsons, Brian Dennehy, and Dianne Wiest. (Happily, the *real*

Dianne Wiest, not the Wiest as played by Andie MacDowell in *Footloose*

.) But mostly, we’re given too little to react to beyond leads Jack Black, Steve Martin, and Owen Wilson performing exactly the light-comic shtick they usually do, and delivering their blah dialogue with so little conviction that they don’t even appear to be

listening

to one another. For a film so vocal about celebrating flight,

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The Big Year

is depressingly earthbound.

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