

Haul on Wheels: "Tower Heist" and "A Very Harold & Kumar Christmas"

Written by Mike Schulz

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TOWER HEIST

A lot of people make a lot of fun of director Brett Ratner, partly because his résumé – which includes not one, not two, but *three Rush Hour* movies – makes it so darned easy to.

So let's consider Ratner's new action comedy *Tower Heist*. In the film, a Wall Street financier, played by a smarm-oozing Alan Alda, swindles the pension funds from the staff at his swanky Manhattan high-rise, stashing their earnings within the confines of a mint-condition Ferrari parked in his living room. (I'll give you a moment to wrap your heads around that information.) Led by Ben Stiller's determined building manager, a motley team of employees plans to steal their dough back by inconspicuously sneaking the car out of Alda's penthouse apartment. And while this scenario is, at best, wildly implausible, it's still not unreasonable to hope that its execution will yield a goodly amount of enjoyment.

The reason it *doesn't*, though, is because Ratner and his quartet of *Tower Heist* writers don't appear to give a damn about the robbery's plotting, and don't seem to care if we don't, either. It should go without saying that the pleasures of a clever, tightly constructed heist flick, from *The Thomas Crown Affair* to (two-thirds of) Steven Soderbergh's

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Ocean's Eleven

series, can be enormous. But what satisfaction can we possibly get from a master plan that, as evidenced here, can only be pulled off if a five-man security staff is distracted by an issue of *Playboy*

? Or a collection of 20-plus in the tower's lobby is distracted by some birthday cake? Or literally *thousands*

of spectators are so distracted by the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade likenesses of Snoopy and SpongeBob SquarePants that not one of them notices the cherry-red Ferrari being lowered from the skyscraper across the street? (Aren't all those people looking up?) Lord knows there are other problems with the movie; tonally, the direction is so unfocused that we frequently need Christophe Beck's score to tell us which moments are designed for comedy and which for excitement. But it's Ratner and company's complete disregard for logic, and even suspended disbelief, that makes

Tower Heist

so frustrating. Was there no other way to humanize Téa Leoni's ultra-competent FBI agent than by also turning her into a sloppy drunk whose blathering unwittingly inspires Stiller's payback scheme?

Yet here's the rub: Despite its flaws, the movie, like *most* Ratner movies, is pretty easy to sit through. While the director's *oeuvre* is mostly crap, it's crap polished to a high gloss, and Ratner pulls off several set pieces here with considerable brio, none finer than the legitimately nerve-racking scene of Matthew Broderick's former stock trader dangling from that airborne Ferrari. Plus, in case the film's aforementioned actors didn't give enough indication, Ratner's cast does a rather expert job of scoring laughs with less than first-rate material. Stiller may be playing things too dark and "real" for maximum amusement, but in addition to Alda, Leoni, and Broderick, talented performers as diverse as Casey Affleck, Michael Peña, Gabourey Sidibe, Judd Hirsch, and the quickly-becoming-invaluable Nina Arianda are all allowed numerous opportunities to shine.

And if all else failed, the film would at least be notable for the long-awaited return of Eddie Murphy – the *actual* Eddie Murphy, not that tired, embarrassed-looking star of all those awful kiddie flicks over the past 15 years. Portraying the film's lone *professional* thief, Murphy may not be doing anything here that he hasn't done before, and the gags he's been given aren't particularly fresh. But his frenzied, motor-mouthed riffing is still fantastically funny and, above all, incredibly welcome – the laughter that accompanies his routines sounds both genuine and *relieved* –

and Ratner's latest becomes a sharper, better movie whenever the comedian is around. I couldn't have cared less about the Ferrari in

Tower Heist.

I was more than content, though, to watch Eddie Murphy steal the *show*

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A VERY HAROLD & KUMAR CHRISTMAS

As the movie is unfailingly raunchy, ridiculous, and willing to go to any extreme – no matter how sketchy or tasteless or just-plain-stupid – for a laugh, you’re going to have to be in the right state of mind to enjoy *A Very Harold & Kumar Christmas*. Happily, when I saw the film, I was in *exactly*

the right state. (Though perhaps not the *perfect*

state: It was the morning, after all, and I was still on the clock.) If you’re not already a fan of this series starring the sensationally game and witty John Cho and Kal Penn, director Todd Strauss-Schulson’s stoner slapstick – for which I, ahem,

high

ly recommend the 3D presentation – probably won’t recruit you to the cause. But if Patton Oswalt as a spliff-selling Santa, a gory Claymation battle, a breakfast-serving companion named WaffleBot, a dirty-minded riff on

A Christmas Story

’s stuck-tongue sequence,

a coked-up infant racing on the ceiling, and that whirligig of hilarious self-deprecation known as Neil Patrick Harris are enough to get you giggling, know that

AVH&KC

will be precisely your cup of spiked holiday punch. And that, in all likelihood, there’s something very, very wrong with us.

For reviews of *Anonymous* and *The Way*, see "[Bard None](#)."

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