

Written by Mike Schulz
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THE CABIN IN THE WOODS

Hollywood's been leading toward it for decades, and with the blithely enjoyable, exceedingly clever *The Cabin in the Woods*, it's finally happened: A movie has been released in which practically everything about it – its plot, its twists, its performers, its characters, its themes, its jokes – could be considered a spoiler.

Because really: Once you know that the film concerns five collegiate hotties who find themselves terrorized at a woodland retreat, and that it's produced and co-written by Joss Whedon of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly* (and the peerless *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*) fame, are there any specifics I could give that *wouldn't* somehow ruin the fun? In a million years, would Whedon be content with a scare-flick storyline this seemingly banal, especially with *Buffy* collaborator Drew Goddard – also the writer of numerous episodes of *Alias* and *Lost* – at the helm? Of course not; one look at those credits, and you can rest assured that *The Cabin in the Woods* will probably be unlike any horror movie you've seen before. And it is. And for most of its length,

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that's a good thing.

So what *can* I say about the film? Well, at first, it resembles a *Friday the 13th*-style slasher outing populated by the cast of *The Breakfast Club*

: Assembling in the titular cabin are a dopey jock (Chris Hemsworth), a spoiled princess (Anna Hutchison), a friendly grind (Jesse Williams), a wide-eyed virgin (Kristen Connolly), and a stoner weirdo (Fran Kranz) ... none of whose labels proves entirely accurate. There's also – and here's where the spoilers really start kicking in – a parallel narrative involving a bunch of officious-looking technicians and national-security officials (led by Richard Jenkins and Bradley Whitford) who appear insidiously connected to our clueless victims-to-be. And beginning with the early shot of an eagle soaring above a winding road and exploding upon its contact with ... *something*

... the particulars to the rest of Whedon's and Goddard's trippy offering are best left undescribed. Suffice it to say that the two plotlines mesh in a rather staggeringly ambitious deconstruction of modern horror tropes, and a cinematic exploration of both the genre's many clichés and, more specifically, the *need* for those clichés.

If I'm making *The Cabin in the Woods* sound less like an entertainment than a grad-school thesis project, that's absolutely intentional. To be sure, there are plenty of fast, gory shocks, more-than-fair amounts of suspense and tension, and – in their delivery of Whedon's and Goddard's knowingly ironic dialogue – the actors are universally appealing. (Unsurprisingly, the *most*

appealing turn out to be Jenkins, with his gloriously hangdog melancholy, and Whitford, doing a malevolent spin on his amped-up Josh Lyman from

The West Wing

.) Yet my guess is that for its target demographic of fright-flick aficionados and Whedon fanatics, the movie will be less fun to watch than to

re-watch. There are so many levels of game-playing and convention-abiding (and -breaking) going on here, particularly after its two disparate worlds inevitably collide, that the film eventually morphs from an almost purely gut experience into an almost purely intellectual one. And while it remains an inventive, fascinating puzzle, by its finale the film is no longer scary, and no longer funny – it feels merely like an exercise in cinematic one-upmanship, and an attempt to out-meta all meta that's come before. I was glad to have seen Whedon's and Goddard's effort and had a mostly terrific time, but the difference between a truly great horror movie and

The Cabin in the Woods

is like the difference between a hilarious joke and a detailed explanation about why the joke is hilarious.

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THE THREE STOOGES

Based on the incessantly (and understandably) manic, slapstick-heavy trailers for *The Three Stooges*, I presumed that the eight- to 10-year-olds at my screening would laugh their asses off, and they did. The bigger surprise was that the adults in attendance were laughing just as hard. The biggest surprise was that I was frequently one of them. Having almost no fondness whatsoever for the black-and-white antics of Moe, Larry, and Curly as a child, I entered this big-screen update in, to put it mildly, a less than expectant mood. But I'm almost embarrassed to admit to how much fun I had at directors Peter and Bobby Farrelly's intentionally cheesy, spectacularly silly, and oftentimes subversively smart offering, maybe the brothers' most consistently successful comedy since 1996's *Kingpin*.

Its mere wisp of a narrative – involving our hapless heroes' attempts to save their orphanage (where the adult men still live) from financial ruin – proves a perfect entryway into a series of pratfalls, sight gags, and riotously obscene cartoon mayhem that the Farrellys present with gusto and absolute fearlessness. (I don't know how they pulled it off, but the movie's biggest cackle comes after one of the Stooges points a shotgun in the direction of a little girl ... and it goes off.) And re-creating the original Stooges' face-slapping, nose-bopping, eye-gouging routines, Chris Diamantopoulos' Moe, Sean Hayes' Larry, and Will Sasso's Curly are about as priceless a comic team as you could ask for; these sharp actors honor their roles' originators in voice, look, and spirit, yet also lend the film a demented panache that feels all their own. The Farrellys' latest is a hit-or-miss affair that certainly features its share of misses. (Sadly, filmmakers still haven't found a way to make the ravishing Sofia Vergara as entertaining on-screen as she is every week on TV's *Modern Family*.) Yet it's still a guilty-pleasure blast, and that's without even mentioning Jane Lynch and Jennifer Hudson as two of the orphanage's kindly sisters, and the inspired handling of the

Jersey Shore cast, and the über-strict nun who's the chief victim of the Stooges' accidental destruction – and who happens to be played by Larry David. Against all expectation,

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The Three Stooges

winds up being

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THE RAID: REDEMPTION

Imagine, if you can, that all of the comedic violence inflicted on characters in *The Three Stooges* was staged as actual, bone-snapping, blood-spilling violence, and you may begin to approximate the experience of

The Raid: Redemption

, director Gareth Evans' Indonesian action pic that might stand as the new standard-bearer for cinematic carnage. There's really not much to the story, which finds a team of special ops infiltrating an apartment complex filled with drug dealers and assassins, and the unrelenting shoot-outs, stabbings, and hand-to-hand-combat sequences are eventually more exhausting than exhilarating. Yet the choreography in these many scenes of explosive torment is so masterful that you want to applaud even while you're wincing, and a few of the film's performers lend some actual emotional heft to the movie – particularly the boyishly handsome Iko Uwais, who's capable of sublime stillness, yet whose lightning-quick attacks make it seem that he's constantly moving in fast-forward. Ordering his tenants to dispatch the law-enforcing intruders posthaste, the high-rise's criminal mastermind (Ray Sahetapy) coos through the building's intercom, "And please ...

enjoy

yourselves." If you have the stomach for

The Raid: Redemption

, I suggest that you do, too.

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LOCKOUT

In *Lockout*, a futuristic action thriller by directors James Mather and Stephen St. Leger, a beautiful young woman visits an outer-space penal colony on a humanitarian mission and winds up the hostage of a group of snarling murderers and sex offenders. Of course, this was *bound*

to happen, considering that this young woman is (a) the daughter of the president of the United States, and (b) played by Maggie Grace, who, having previously portrayed Liam Neeson's kidnapped daughter in

Taken

, really should think twice about ever leaving the house. Thankfully, though, the profoundly ludicrous, predictable goings-on that result in

Lockout

are more bearable than you might expect, because for all the spotty plotting and asinine dialogue and shoddy visuals (and

man

are some of them shoddy), the filmmakers were at least wise to cast Guy Pearce in the lead.

Playing that most indestructible of action-pic archetypes – the buff, macho, wisecracking bad-ass too cool to ever suggest that anything is

really

at stake in the film – Pearce tackles his role as Grace's savior with sensational wit and alertness, and just enough of a wink to let us know that

he

knows it's all ridiculous, and has decided to have a grand time nonetheless. (With maybe 10 percent of Pearce's lines reading as funny, he manages to be amusing on at least 80 percent of them.) His work here isn't quite worth

Lockout

's ticket price, but it's a pretty outstanding act of salvage in a seemingly unsalvageable effort, and it's hard not to love a deadpan hero who – when asked if her father had any message to give her – tells his damsel-in-distress, "You're adopted."

Biting (Off) the Hand That Feeds You: "The Cabin in the Woods," "The Three Stooges," "The Raid: Redem

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