

As the movie's trailers have been running since what feels like the *last* presidential campaign, it's understandable if viewers enter the Will Ferrell/Zach Galifianakis political spoof *The Campaign* 

worried that all of the hilarious bits have already been spoiled for them. The wonderful surprise of director Jay Roach's comedy, however, is that they haven't – not unless viewers have somehow been privy to a trailer that lasts 85 minutes.

Nimbly vacillating between broad slapstick and sharp satire, *The Campaign* boasts the highest of high concepts, with Ferrell's smarmy, aggressive, horndog Democrat Cam Brady in a North Carolina Congressional race against Galifianakis' sweet, passive, mincing Republican Marty Huggins. With these actors in these roles, the film could easily have emerged as an initially amusing, quickly tiresome autopilot comedy, one with little on its mind beyond scoring laughs from endless repetition of its stars' familiar shtick. (This is hardly the first time we've seen Ferrell play a strutting egomaniac or Galifianakis portray a clueless man-child.) Yet beginning with its early scene in which Ferrell's incumbent publicly "apologizes" for leaving a sexually explicit message on a Christian family's answering machine – eventually blaming his *faux pas* 

on the family for still

having

an answering machine – Roach's movie proves far smarter, and a good deal funnier, than perhaps anticipated.

As you've likely seen *The Campaign*'s previews, you've likely seen its major comedic money shots: Ferrell punching a baby in the face, Galifianakis shooting Ferrell in the leg, Galifianakis' young son admitting that he let a petting-zoo goat lick his (gasp!). Happily, though, these and other farcical gambits feature punchlines that pay off even beyond the routines' comic shock – that shooting incident leads to an uptick in the polls for the *shooter* –

and for all of the lunatic clowning on hand, Chris Henchy's and Shawn Harwell's script is also unexpectedly savvy. I loved the scene in which Brady tries, in vain, to recite the Lord's prayer with mime-show hints from his chief of staff (Jason Sudeikis). But I cackled even harder at the debate sequence that found Huggins deriding one of Brady's self-authored books as a "Communist manifesto" – a 15-page book, titled

Rainbow Land

, that Brady wrote in second grade.

The Campaign

's satire

isn't exactly stinging, but it's certainly astute, and while Ferrell and Galifianakis easily sustain their winning, oftentimes riotous sketch-comedy caricatures, they're at their most inspired when demonstrating how close to real life the film's political lampoons actually are. (John Lithgow and Dan Aykroyd, obviously having a ball, play a pair of corrupt billionaires who are thinly disguised versions of the Koch brothers ... so thinly disguised that they're named the *Motch* 

brothers.)

By its climax, *The Campaign* too heavily indulges in the kind of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* sentimentality that, previously, it mostly avoided. Yet even then, there's something terrifically charming about the film's cheerful (if cheerfully vulgar) political fantasy; Roach's offering suggests that even the most mean-spirited of buffoons can learn to be a *genial* 

buffoon, a lesson that you wish more actual politicians would take note of. All told, *The Campaign* 

is a delightful surprise, with possibly its biggest and best surprise coming from Karen Maruyama's sensational, hysterical supporting turn. I wouldn't dream of spoiling the joke of her role, but I hope that, somewhere, Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen are laughing their heads off.



A sleek, efficient continuation of Matt Damon's action-thriller franchise, director Tony Gilroy's *The Bourne Legacy* 

casts Jeremy Renner as a super-spy genetically engineered for maximum ass-kicking capability, and the movie feels a little genetically engineered, too – exciting and accomplished, but lacking the humanity and wit of the series' previous installments. Although Renner does a more than serviceable job of suggesting his operative's escalating desperation and enacts heroic feats with spectacular skill, you're not really allowed to feel much for his Aaron Cross,

and while the numerous action scenes are well-choreographed, too few are truly exhilarating; the movie's a bit on the effective-but-generic side. Nonetheless, it remains a pretty terrific time. Gilroy stages several encounters – particularly a sustained gunfight in a ramshackle house – with speed and clarity, and the jolts provided are legitimately startling, with the early destruction of a log cabin and the medical-research-lab shooting spree (the latter instigated by a terrifying Željko Ivanek) real gut-wrenchers. The stuntwork is exceptional and the film's performances are uniformly strong, with welcome new recruits Edward Norton, Stacy Keach, and Oscar Isaac joining Bourne-series veterans – some of them seen in mere cameos – Scott Glenn, David Strathairn, Albert Finney, and Joan Allen. And while

The Bourne Legacy

's final third doesn't give her the chance to do much more than panic and run and scream "He's got a gun!" and "Aaron,

run

!", Rachel Weisz, as a brilliant scientist and Cross' unwitting tag-along, is at least given an applause-worthy bit in the film's climactic, mostly awesome chase scene. If you ever find yourself tearing through metropolitan crowds on a motorcycle with a crazed gunman on your tail, I pray you also have Weisz sitting side-saddle. That lady can kick

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NITRO CIRCUS: THE MOVIE

The action stunts also fly fast and furious in *Nitro Circus: The Movie*, though there should probably be an asterisk next to that "fast," given the incessant employment of slow-motion in this extreme-sporting outing by directors Gregg Godfrey and Jeremy Rawle. Continuing the half-crazed exploits of the stunt team led by Travis Pastrana (and famous through their numerous DVDs and MTV reality show), the movie is like the eager-to-please kid brother to the *Jackass* 

spectacles, with the most judgment-impairing beverage on sight being Red Bull and even the word "shit" routinely bleeped out. It's also, despite numerous impressive feats performed on motor vehicles and Big Wheels, rather tiresome; while the Nitro Circus gang appears fun and friendly, it's not very funny, and once you've seen one death-defying, slow-mo leap off a ramp into water or mulch, you've pretty much seen 'em all. (There's also a bothersome surplus of intrusive, talking-head testimonials to Nitro Circus' greatness by the likes of Johnny Knoxville, Jeff Tremaine, and Channing Tatum, the latter of whose arrival is, in 2012, absolutely

unsurprising.) Still, for lovers of this sort of thing, it'll easily do until the next *Jackass* 

flick gets the green light. There's an especially stomach-tightening segment in which the guys – and one gal, Jolene Van Vugt, who's almost strictly decorative here – leap between two skyscrapers in Panama, and

Nitro Circus: The Movie

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opening sequence, featuring dozens of bikers hurtling through the air, makes expert use of the movie's 3D effects. Plus, one of the feats constructed by the group is almost ridiculously enjoyable to watch: a game called "nitro golf," which finds its players bicycling down a ramp, soaring into the air, and hoping to land in the hole of an enormous inflatable golf ball. After many hilariously unsuccessful attempts and a couple of equally riotous successful ones, one of the Nitro Circus stuntmen screamed, "Nitro golf

rules

!" Hell,

yeah

, it does.



Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones, in *Hope Springs*, portray a Midwestern couple whose 31-year marital rut has made it difficult for them to even be in the same room together, making the stars' characters two of the only people on Earth who wouldn't want to spend all day, every day, with Meryl Streep or Tommy Lee Jones. I have a few problems with director David Frankel's dramatic comedy, most of them concerning Frankel's direction of it; he peppers the score, and impedes the momentum, with too many easy-listening ballads – despite loving Annie Lennox's "Why," I didn't really need to hear the entire song here – and visually, the movie is terribly static. (Much of our time is spent in couples-counseling sessions led by a fine, serious Steve Carell, but as was proved especially well on HBO's

In Treatment

, on-screen therapy needn't be presentationally tedious.) But I would've happily endured much worse for the chance to see Streep and Jones, in their first cinematic pairing, play off one another with the relaxed, confident aplomb they demonstrate in *Hope Springs* 

. From literally their first moments in view, with Streep's Kay nervously preparing herself for sex

while Jones' Arnold absently reads a golfing magazine, the audience is alert to the actors' subtle comic genius; every one of Jones' grouchy-tightwad grumblings scores a laugh, and when Kay is asked if she prefers giving or receiving oral pleasure, Streep brings down the house with a perfectly sincere, perfectly timed "Huh?" Yet there's also legitimate pain behind Kay's and Arnold's struggles, and Vanessa Taylor's beauty of a script grants the stars ample opportunities to stretch their dramatic muscles through a series of anguished, revealing conversations and silent glances that give the chuckles deeper resonance. In a rather unusual reversal from the norm,

Hope Springs

is a film with weak direction but a first-rate script. It also has Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones. That's the highest nine-word recommendation I think I've ever written.

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