

Send in the Clones: "Resident Evil: Retribution," "Ruby Sparks," and "Last Ounce of Courage"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 16 September 2012 12:31

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RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION

If you were at a Friday-afternoon screening of *Resident Evil: Retribution* and heard, some 30 seconds before the end credits, an audible groan of frustration and annoyance, I apologize if my unplanned outburst was distracting. I just couldn't believe that this mindless, endless series was going to require yet *an other* freakin' sequel.

I hope that wasn't a spoiler, because it appears that this franchise's only goals now are to perpetuate more *Resident Evil* movies, and – judging by this fifth entry – to pilfer shamelessly from other, better sci-fi action thrillers. Stealing from *The Matrix*, director Paul W.S. Anderson's new outing finds leather-clad heroine Alice (Milla Jovovich) trapped in an alternate, computer-simulated "reality," a universe where she and fellow rebels routinely wage war against zombies and monsters and zombie-monsters. Borrowing from *Aliens*, this fourth follow-up finds Alice the accidental protector of a little girl (Aryana Engineer) who looks uncannily like Newton, and who also winds up kidnapped by a shrieking creature that stows the child in an oversize embryonic cocoon. And to reinforce the idea that there's nothing new under this particular sun, *Retribution* is awash in clones – clones of Alice, and of that little girl, and of characters (including those

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played by Michelle Rodriguez and Sienna Guillory) killed in previous installments ... perhaps because it's becoming harder and harder to find new actors willing to participate in this ever-more-vacuous video-game-inspired series.

Though he has no discernible gifts for pacing or coherent staging, Anderson does at least provide a few memorable images, such as the sight of thousands of clones traveling along an assembly line like slabs of beef at a processing plant, and one of Rodriguez's bad-asses being devoured by an underwater cadre of undead cannibals. And the film's opening action blow-out, which takes place on the aircraft carrier we saw at the end of 2010's *Resident Evil: Afterlife*, is actually rather impressive, as it shows the explosive melee happening in reverse, with bullets hurtling

into

guns, and missiles getting sucked into the jets that launched them. Sadly, though, you could also apply the word "sucked" to nearly everything regarding the dialogue and narrative structure and portrayals, with Jovovich again proving that while she's an intriguing camera subject, she's a depressingly soulless actor. (At one point, Alice, or one of her clones, is told that she's "one of fifty basic models" created by the film's mysterious cloning organization, and in terms of performance, Jovovich is pretty much "basic model" incarnate.) Die-hard fans of the franchise probably won't want to miss it, but there's otherwise no reason to catch

Resident Evil: Retribution

, unless you're the type who gets your money's worth from any monster movie featuring yowling CGI behemoths like this movie's Licker, a gigantic bruiser whose brains appear to be on the outside of its head. Enjoy the sight, as they're really the only brains on display here.



RUBY SPARKS

As most writers will tell you, there are few things more intimidating than the sight of a blank piece of paper. (Or, for the non-Luddites among us, a blank Word document.) But in movies about authors struggling with writer's block, the sight of a wordless piece of paper or computer screen can be intensely promising, considering that this image has fueled screen entertainments as smart and clever and satisfying as *Barton Fink*, *Adaptation*, and *Stranger Than Fiction*

. Happily, with

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Ruby Sparks

, we can now add another impressive title to the writer's-block genre. A surreal comedy about one-hit-wonder author Calvin Weir-Fields (Paul Dano) – a young man who types up the outline for the perfect girlfriend and is understandably astonished when his creation comes to life (in the form of the film's screenwriter Zoe Kazan) –

Ruby Sparks

is directors Jonathan Dayton's and Valerie Faris' first cinematic offering since

Little Miss Sunshine

. It also suggests that we may have been missing out on a lot of wonderfully humane and thoughtful independent comedies in the six years since that Oscar winner was released.

Exploring Calvin's and Ruby's impossible, hilarious, wrenching relationship with nuance and specificity, Dayton and Faris create true, naturalistic magic through their beautifully rendered compositions; the simple, lovely image of our leads holding one another while slowly spinning in an office chair says more about the nature of their gently dizzying romance than any five pages of dialogue could. And as in

Little Miss Sunshine

, the directors prove utterly sensational with actors, with the eccentric and moving Dano and Kazan matched by a stellar supporting ensemble featuring Chris Messina (never better), Annette Bening, Antonio Banderas, Steve Coogan, Elliott Gould, and Alia Shawkat. The movie's a bit on the indie-twee side, and its finale reminds you that, as current romantic comedies go,

(500) Days of Summer

may have been more influential than it perhaps should've been. Yet with its ingenious script and heartfelt emotionalism, Dayton's and Faris' feature is still a captivating achievement; there may be occasional lulls, but almost all throughout,

Ruby Sparks

flies.



LAST OUNCE OF COURAGE

Darrel Campbell's and Kevin McAfee's faith-based drama *Last Ounce of Courage* opens with three of its characters seen in home-movie footage. Were the directors subtly preparing us for the 110-minute home movie that follows? A thuddingly amateurish presentation about a family torn apart by the son's death overseas and the father's subsequent campaign to put the "Christ" back in "Christmas," the movie boasts some of the most atrocious lighting I've ever seen in a film receiving a national release; the unsightly shadows on the actors' faces should receive

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billing as co-stars. The ghost of Ed Wood, meanwhile, might as well have been responsible for the sound mixing and continuity, and the film's self-righteous, overwritten screeds on freedom – a word that probably gets uttered here more frequently than "I" or "the" – would be unbearable even if star Marshall R. Teague didn't deliver them with so much jaw-dropping condescension. If you can get past

Last Ounce of Courage

's lack of professionalism, to say nothing of its rather offensive bigotry and xenophobia disguised as endorsements of "traditional Christian values," you'll at least be treated to warm performances by Jennifer O'Neill, Rusty Joiner, and Nikki Novak, with Campbell himself legitimately hilarious as a swishy high-school drama coach. But I still found the movie a tedious and borderline embarrassing chore to sit through – an opinion, I must admit, likely

not

shared by my fellow audience members who felt the need to applaud at the end. Whether they were clapping for the film or for the Ronald Reagan quote that preceded the closing credits, of course, is open to debate.

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