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LOOPER

Rian Johnson’s *Looper*, a time-travel thriller set primarily in the year 2044, casts Joseph Gordon-Levitt as a contract killer whose life is upended with the arrival of his latest target: his older self, who has been transported from the year 2074 and is played by Bruce Willis. This means that, with Gordon-Levitt delivering rather uncanny likenesses of his co-star’s traditional scowls and smirks – and with the younger actor’s countenance bizarrely altered to resemble the elder actor’s familiar face – Willis essentially plays both leading roles ... which isn’t the most enticing of setups if, like me, you generally find one Bruce Willis more than enough.

It turns out, though, that *Looper* is such an exceptional entertainment – so clever and thrilling and funny and oddly moving – that even six or seven Willises probably wouldn’t have hurt it. (And for the record, the actor here gives one of his most forceful and compelling portrayals in years.) Writer/director Johnson’s outing provides much the same outlandish, mind-blowing enjoyment as *Inception*, but in my opinion, it’s a far leaner, sharper piece of work, and in a rarity for time-travel movies, the logistics of Johnson’s storyline, as they’re revealed, feel sound and satisfying. It might not be until the drive home that the film’s narrative curlicues begin to unravel, and by then, you’ll likely be in too exhilarated a mood to care.

In deference to the film’s savvy marketing (refreshingly, a goodly number of major plot points aren’t even *hinted* at in the *Looper* trailers), I’m going to avoid specific discussion of what happens after Gordon-Levitt's character Joe meets Willis' older Joe; I entered the movie gratefully ignorant of its niceties and would prefer not to deprive others of that opportunity. I will say, however, that whatever means were required to make Gordon-Levitt look like the Willis of the mid-1980s – which, I’m guessing, involved a combination of prosthetics and CGI touch-ups – were hardly necessary, and occasionally make for an annoying distraction. Gordon-Levitt already does such a splendid job of mimicking Willis’ externals and ironic readings that the visual trickery comes off as a serious encroachment on his performance, and a particularly gratuitous one considering that he doesn’t resemble a young Willis all *that* much. (In the *New York Times*, reviewer Manohla Dargis nailed it when she wrote that Gordon-Levitt more successfully resembled the Japanese character that Marlon Brando played in

The Teahouse of the August Moon
.)

Yet beyond a few other random quibbles – such as one I have with the tacky, obvious green-screen effects employed whenever figures zip through the air on hover-bikes – Gordon-Levitt’s morphed mug stands among the very few complaints I have with this beautifully paced, terrifically exciting achievement. The violence, when it comes, is fast and vicious yet never brutalizing for the audience, and Johnson proves himself a wizard at composition and narrative shorthand; one particularly lucid, engrossing montage follows Willis through 30 years of Joe’s life, and offers a surprisingly rich and haunting assessment of this man’s three decades in roughly 90 seconds of screen time. Delivering reams of wonderfully terse yet evocative dialogue, the film’s supporting cast – a topnotch one boasting Emily Blunt, Jeff Daniels, Garrett Dillahunt, Paul Dano, and Noah Segan – grounds the fantastical happenings with true feeling, convincing you, as even *Inception* didn’t fully, that the on-screen events actually *matter*. And while I wouldn’t dream of giving away his purpose here, I’m not sure enough could be said about the acting feat of Pierce Gagnon, who couldn’t have been even 10 years old at the time of filming, and whose hypnotic, scary, deeply mature performance might emerge at
Looper
’s most profoundly – and deliriously entertaining – element. “He’s a good kid,” says Gordon-Levitt to Blunt. Oh no, he’s not. He’s a freaking
brilliant
kid.

PITCH PERFECT

As the movie opens with a group of off-screen *a cappella* performers warbling the Universal Studios theme music, you’ll probably know within
Pitch Perfect
’s first few seconds whether the movie will keep you happily grinning or tearing your hair out in
Glee
-related irritation. Even if your response leans toward the latter, though, I highly recommend sticking through director Jason Moore’s frequently hysterical feature-film debut, which is so thoroughly buoyant and winning that its failings can be mostly ignored. To be sure, the plotting –

which finds Anna Kendrick's wannabe music producer grudgingly joining a collegiate, all-female *a cappella* group – doesn't hold much (or really any) surprise, the lip-synch continuity is occasionally embarrassing, and several of the movie's outsize slapstick gambits are grossly cartoonish. (That "grossly" is meant in the literal sense when Anna Camp's blonde bitch-on-wheels spews vomit with the force and velocity of Terry Gilliam's restaurant-patron glutton in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*.) Yet the movie also boasts a fresh, spiky comic spirit and numerous musical mash-ups that are enormously appealing, and Kendrick, with her sensational vocals and exquisite timing, is exactly the tart and touching protagonist the film needs; Moore's outing is less *Glee* than a tune-filled take on the Emma Stone comedy *Easy A,* and happily, one blessed with a similarly inventive supporting ensemble. Many will no doubt give best-in-show honors to *Pitch Perfect*'s Rebel Wilson, who played Kristen Wiig's horrifyingly tattooed roommate in *Bridesmaids*, and who makes her nearly every reading here a sardonic delight. But I'd actually go with John Michael Higgins and Elizabeth Banks, whose roles conjure instant memories of *Best in Show* itself – or, rather, of Fred Willard's hilariously clueless announcer in that Christopher Guest classic. With the performers delivering dimwitted, note-by-note commentary as Kendrick's team vies for state and national championships, the effect of Higgins' and Banks' dueling-morons act is like getting two Willards for the price of one, and might singlehandedly make the movie a must-own someday. Who, after all, wouldn't want to commit to memory such zingers as Banks' "Nothing makes a woman feel more like a girl than a man who sings like a boy," or Higgins' appraisal "Women are about as good at *a cappella* as they are being doctors"?

WON'T BACK DOWN

Even those who consider themselves fundamentally opposed to teachers' unions – whether through personal experience or viewings of such education-reform documentaries as *Waiting*

for “Superman” –
might find it frequently hard to stomach
Won’t Back Down
, a baldly sentimental, unfairly stacked melodrama about a pair of determined women (Maggie Gyllenhaal’s dyslexic mom and Viola Davis’ disillusioned teacher) fighting to take control of a local elementary school. Though director Daniel Barnz’s outing makes a token stab at ideological fairness, one that’s almost successful in a couple of scenes with Holly Hunter as a sympathetic union crusader, the good and bad guys here are drawn with crushing obviousness, and the relentless speechifying is exhausting even
before
you realize that Gyleenhaal’s character has been fashioned as a strident, bullying pain in the neck. Still, despite the pandering, and arm-twisting, and almost total lack of nuance, I’ll admit there were times when I bought it like a total sucker, principally because the ever-phenomenal Davis, even when working with material as tired as this, appears absolutely incapable of on-screen falseness. Her
Won’t Back Down
material and presentation may be wanting, but whenever Davis speaks here, she makes the film’s pious lecturing sound sensible, and its cloud of defeatist gloom at least momentarily leavened by sunlight.

HOUSE AT THE END OF THE STREET

Playing a high-schooler who befriends the introvert (Max Thieriot) residing in a nearby woodland home – a vaguely creepy young man whose unbalanced sister murdered their parents years earlier – Jennifer Lawrence, in *House at the End of the Street*, does what she can to bring gravitas and human interest to the proceedings, as do Elisabeth Shue as her conflicted mother and Gil Bellows as a kindly sheriff. Yet their collective fine work proves for naught, because the lame-brained, derivative, decidedly not-scary trifle they’re appearing in crushes their efforts at every given opportunity, and leaves its audience with a laughable finale that could quite possibly inspire a defamation-of-character lawsuit on behalf of the movie
Psycho
. After
Winter’s Bone
and
The Hunger Games

, we're used to seeing Lawrence in the woods, but director Mark Tonderai's fright flick finds the actress in what might be a geographical first: in the woods while totally at sea.

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