***WARM BODIES***

See if this sounds familiar: A sweet, lonely, non-human – but decidedly male – being with a limited vocabulary toils through a portion of Earth all but completely devoid of life, performing the same mundane, regimented activities day after day. Occasionally, he augments the dreariness by collecting tchotchkes from more civilized days, which he stores in his makeshift home-slash-warehouse, and comforts himself by playing old music on a recognizably antiquated device. One day, a beautiful female enters his life, and although he's initially nervous about making contact, he proceeds to woo her by offering safety and shelter, making her laugh, and subtly expressing his undying devotion. The female, however, soon leaves, but our protagonist doesn't take her evacuation lying down. Instead, he follows his beloved, and subsequently sets into motion events that not only might reunite the pair, but might lead to the rejuvenation – indeed, the very survival – of the entire human race.

If you didn't know the movie in question was titled *Warm Bodies*, and didn't know it was a romantic comedy about a zombie who becomes enamored with a girl with a pulse, wouldn't that description sound just a *teensy* bit reminiscent of *WALL•E* ?

Having said that, there are certainly worse films to shamelessly pilfer from. And while writer/director Jonathan Levine's adaptation of Isaac Marion's novel steals from several other works along the way – with the sad-sack narration familiar from *Adaptation* and the narrative familiar from, well, nearly *every* romance in which young love is potentially thwarted by class and uncomprehending parents, *a lá Pretty in Pink* – *Warm Bodies* still feels like something of an original. Like Levine's *50/50* , which dared to find the laughs in a cancer diagnosis, his new release offers up a potentially off-putting premise, considering that Nicholas Hoult's zombie hero R (as in " *rr-r-r-rh-h-h*

”) falls for Teresa Palmer’s Julie after eating boyfriend Dave Franco’s brains. Yet the movie is so thoroughly charming, and even touching, that the occasional gross-outs in this agreeably lightweight endeavor come to seem less alienating than dramatically necessary; without them, Levine’s outing could easily be indistinguishable from any other moist-eyed (dead-)boy-meets-girl rom-com.

Then again, you’d still have Hoult in the lead, and in the end, his clever, empathetic, lovely performance is more than enough to make the film worth a viewing. Without question, Levine delivers some terrific verbal and visual gags, and he’s great at satirically upending expectation; in one of his finer inspirations, the director begins R’s zombie-makeover scene with Roy Orbison’s “Pretty Woman” on the soundtrack, and before you can complete your eye roll at the cliché, Julie tells her friend Nora to turn that damned song *off* already. (“What? It’s funny!” replies Nora, taking the needle off the record.) And while Palmer – whose resemblance to Kristen Stewart is downright uncanny – is rather dull as the object of R’s affections, the movie boasts wonderfully enjoyable turns by Rob Corddry and Analeigh Tipton, and by John Malkovich, who plays it straight and winds up bringing forceful, welcome gravitas to the proceedings. But Hoult is Levine’s ace-in-the-hole. Comedically graceful even when stumbling and lurching, and exuding screen charisma and sexiness even under pallid pancake makeup, the actor makes R’s romantic plight both amusing and moving, and scores numerous laughs with his hilariously self-effacing, woe-is-me voice-overs. (Embarrassing himself in front of Julie, Hoult’s R laments, “I wanna die all
*over*
again.”)
*Warm Bodies*
is pretty terrific. Hoult, in his committed and inventive portrayal, is something else entirely: cinema’s first zombie that you could happily, and proudly, take home to mother.

***STAND UP GUYS***

By this point in their careers, Al Pacino and Christopher Walken are both so absurdly mannered that just about everything they say comes off as funny, whether it’s meant to or not. Consequently, they’re probably the best things that could have happened to director Fisher Stevens’ *Stand Up Guys*, because without the actors’ dueling-hambone act – Pacino with his

guttural braying, Walken with his sleepwalker-from-Mars melancholy – the movie would hardly be worth discussing. Not much happens in this autumn-years crime drama that finds Walken forced to perform a gangland hit on best friend Pacino; the men eat, drink, visit a brothel, assist a naked lady, and steal a car (bringing the typically, amusingly dyspeptic Alan Arkin along for the ride), and none of these events, as presented, is of particular import or interest. Yet while Stevens' direction is ham-fisted and screenwriter Noah Haidle's dialogue aims for a *noir* -esque pungency that it doesn't come close to achieving, at least the film's stars appear to be having some fun. (More than *we* are, at any rate.) Pacino, his hair standing up as though a finger were permanently ensconced in a light socket, brings a cheerful, revved-up vulgarity to his underwritten role. And Walken, bless him, is so divinely loopy that he can even pronounce a word as simple as "sunsets" in a way you've never heard before. *Stand Up Guys* is by no means earth-shattering – or, to use Walken's cadence here, "earth-*shattering*" – but it could easily satisfy your yen for big-screen eccentricity for *years*.

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