

Lady and the Chump: "Identity Thief" and "Side Effects"

Written by Mike Schulz

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IDENTITY THIEF

Near the very start of the Jason Bateman/Melissa McCarthy comedy *Identity Thief*, Bateman's character, the mild-mannered businessman Sandy Patterson, is enjoying a birthday party thrown by his wife (Amanda Peet) and two adorable daughters. After blowing out his birthday candles, Sandy scoops his younger daughter in the air – she looks about four or five – and, in what seems like a totally improvised gesture, turns her upside down, playfully plopping her face-first into the cake. The whole family laughs, but no one laughs harder than that cake-smearing little girl, who takes a second to wipe frosting from her eyes and mouth before exclaiming, to our utter delight, "Oh my

God

!"

Just thought I'd share that in case you were curious about the movie's funny moments, because for me, that was the only one.

It was absolutely *not* the only one, however, for the inordinately well-attended Friday-morning crowd with whom I saw *Identity Thief* – patrons who cackled with rapture at practically everything McCarthy said and did, and who at one point, during an especially

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unpleasant scene in which she allowed herself to be hit by a car, even

applauded

. Heaven knows that the hard-working McCarthy has earned the goodwill she's amassed in recent years, and no one can accuse the star of slacking off in this Seth Gordon comedy that finds her con artist Diana usurping Sandy's name to rack up debilitating credit-card bills.

(Personally speaking, I've also been a big fan of McCarthy ever since she popped up in 1999's *Go*

, an excellent movie that she managed to steal in fewer than 60 seconds of screen time.) But assuming that the collective reaction in my auditorium wasn't an aberration, aren't the audiences who are roaring at

Identity Thief

, and its female lead's antics in particular, at all bothered by how insultingly she's treated in the film?

In fairness, McCarthy is barely treated worse than anyone else in the woefully unamusing, unsatisfying road-trip-slapstick-with-"heart," one that makes Bateman look bereft of personality and even manages to sink the seemingly unsinkable Eric Stonestreet. (The two of you who've been longing for a gander at the *Modern Family* actor's bare ass should reserve your tickets now.) But what oh what did McCarthy ever do to deserve the senselessly conceived, grossly offensive role she's been handed here? One would think it would be enough for the

Bridesmaids

scene-stealer – one of our country's most effortlessly likable and fizzy comediennes – to have to play a gauche, graceless beast with too-heavy eye shadow who's able to emerge unscathed even after taking a guitar to the face or a windshield to the backside. (Wile E. Coyote himself would cringe at the abuse McCarthy's Diana suffers here.) Yet after more than an hour has passed in this appallingly overlong, 110-minute endeavor, and Diana has been effectively established as wholly untrustworthy and borderline-psychotic, damned if Gordon and screenwriter Craig Mazin don't do an about-face, and attempt to turn this ill-bred monster into an object of

pity

.

Weeping over her reflexive felonious tendencies and, later, her lonely childhood – and eventually endearing herself to Sandy's daughters, who chirp "I love you" seemingly minutes after meeting her – Diana the Misunderstood Sad Sack is every bit as fraudulent as Diana the Sociopathic Crook, and neither is the least bit deserving of McCarthy's talents. Insanely good sport that she must be, the performer attacks both her low-comedy and low-sentiment routines with equal vigor, and gets the sniffers in the audience sniffing when she nervously arrives for a late-film dinner date in an elegant black dress that Diana discovers is more flattering than the tacky Day-Glo prints she was accustomed to. (Who woulda thunk it?) But McCarthy's considerable gifts are in no way enough to redeem her idiotic role, or the idiotic script that *of course*

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has to trot out a pair of gun-toting thugs on our leads' heels, or the idiotic finale that breaks every rule previously established about the laws of incarceration. If you ask me, I'd like to see *Identity Thief*

itself thrown behind bars. Freakin' thing stole two hours of my life.



SIDE EFFECTS

Steven Soderbergh's *Side Effects*, written by the director's frequent collaborator Scott Z. Burns, is a thriller about the ugly complications that ensue when a young woman begins taking a new anti-depressant, and it's probably best to not know much more about the plot than that. This is partly because Soderbergh's latest – a sharply edited, enticingly moody work boasting top-tier performances by Rooney Mara, Jude Law, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Channing Tatum – features a narrative that, in a nice surprise, doesn't go in any of the directions you expect it to. But it's also partly because the unexpected directions it *does*

go in, when all is said and done, lead to a pretty conventional resolution, and if you've seen more than a couple of Hitchcock movies, even a rather predictable one. Until its disappointing final 20 minutes, though,

Side Effects

is a fine, twisty ride, and definitely worth catching if, as he's threatened, this does indeed prove to be Soderbergh's last cineplex release before his retirement from filmmaking. (The Oscar winner's recently completed Liberace bio-pic

Behind the Candelabra

is scheduled to air on HBO in the spring.) I'm not sure I believe him, or maybe I just don't *want*

to believe him, but if the bumner news turns out to be true, we could certainly have been stuck with a less impressive swan song than this one.

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