

Buddies Hack It: "The Incredible Burt Wonderstone" and "The Call"

Written by Mike Schulz
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THE INCREDIBLE BURT WONDERSTONE

A mere week after the release of *Oz the Great & Powerful*, the garish, boring box-office smash that's neither great nor powerful, Misnomer March continues with

The Incredible Burt Wonderstone

, a comedy about warring Las Vegas magicians that's awkwardly cast, overly sentimental, and decidedly not incredible. Yet considering how roundly disappointing the 2013 film year has been thus far, you can still have a fair amount of fun at director Don Scardino's outing, despite this slapstick with heart being scattershot at best, and despite the movie almost appearing *apologetic*

about its most unexpected and mordantly funny bits.

Burt Wonderstone casts Steve Carell as the titular prestidigitator – a formerly brilliant Bally's headliner now stuck in a dead-end act with longtime pal Anton Marvelton (Steve Buscemi) – and the movie feels slightly off from the start, primarily because the role of Wonderstone appears so tailor-fit for Will Ferrell that you can't believe Ferrell himself wasn't given a crack at it. A clueless, vainglorious fool in the vein of Ron Burgundy and Ricky Bobby, Wonderstone addresses his partner, his stage crew, and his groupies with the same dismissive air of condescending entitlement, and Carell adopts a comically haughty accent to match – Siegfried as portrayed by Dame Edith Evans. The stunt, however, doesn't take. Whereas Ferrell burrows so deeply into his preening-lummox roles that you frequently can't separate the star from the dipsticks he plays, Carell is too naturally reserved, or maybe too timid, to be convincing as this

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film's aggressively thoughtless egomaniac. Of course, as *Burt Wonderstone* gives its protagonist a lonely-childhood backstory that finds the grade-school Burt forced to bake his own birthday cake, we know the character isn't a jerk at heart, and will eventually learn the errors of his blah blah blah and drop the imperious attitude and affected dialect. (The latter of which, strangely, gets dropped long

before

Wonderstone turns into a big softie.) But with the movie's title role assumed by Carell, a performer whose on-screen niceness is beginning to feel as oppressive as that of Tom Hanks, his d-bag routine emerges as

just

a routine (if an occasionally amusing one), and Wonderstone's transformation into a kind-hearted sweetie is less blandly unimaginative than sadly inevitable.

Unfortunately, most of the movie appears to be following Carell's lead, continually favoring sentiment over madcap invention. There are times when the two actually dovetail beautifully, as in the reconciliation between the best-friend magicians that finds Carell's stone face a touching and hilarious contrast to the anguished, unintelligible apology caught in his throat. More often, though, the film lays on its maudlin elements with undue excess – particularly in the sequences with Alan Arkin as Wonderstone's childhood hero – while its most inspired gags are delivered almost as afterthoughts. (In one particularly satisfying, gratifyingly rude throwaway, we're shown Marvelton's humanitarian efforts in bringing magic kits to starving children in Cambodia, who promptly try to eat them.) In general, the meaner (and more riotous) *Burt Wonderstone* gets, the more the film tries to

hide

its meanness; I think it says something that the most hysterical and well-sustained scene in the whole movie, in which we learn the criminal secret behind Wonderstone's most miraculous bit of sleight-of-hand, takes place two minutes before the end credits roll.

Still, you'll find a goodly number of random pleasures here even before its late-film surge: Olivia Wilde, comically exasperated as Wonderstone's incredulous assistant; terrific character turns by James Gandolfini and the much-missed Jay Mohr; the perfectly timed demolition of one of Vegas' cherished casinos. And appearing in what amounts to an extended cameo, Jim Carrey is feverishly in his element as a Criss Angel-esque street performer famed for his feats of unbridled masochism, sleeping on beds of hot coals and holding his urine for a remarkable 12 days. It doesn't make much sense that this character is laughed at for his unique skill set – he's constantly referred to as a bad magician when he appears to be a *miraculous* magician – and it makes less sense that Carrey is playing him, as the comedian (who, at 51, does look in spectacular shape) is at least two decades too old for this upstart figure. But when he's as ferally funny as he is here, better to have a miscast Carrey than no Carrey at all; his glorious, unhinged clowning puts the too-rare "incredible" in

The Incredible Burt Wonderstone

, and much of the "wonder," too.

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THE CALL

The plotting is manipulative, the dialogue is perfunctory, the climax is a joke ... and director Brad Anderson's thriller *The Call* is *still* a helluva good time. There's no nuance in this bluntly effective shocker that casts a strong, empathetic Halle Berry as a seasoned 911 operator and a heartbreaking Abigail Breslin as a potential victim with an untraceable cell phone. Yet that's actually as it should be, as nuance would likely only get in the way of the shameless, gut-level kick of watching Berry and Breslin attempt to outsmart one of the world's stupidest serial killers in one of the most satisfying shout-back-at-the-screen entertainments we've been given in years. It's all vaguely ridiculous, but during

The Call

's 90 minutes of “

Look behind you

!’s and “

Pick up that phone, you idiot

!’s and “

Aa-a-a-a-a

!!!’s, I couldn't imagine wanting to be anywhere else.

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