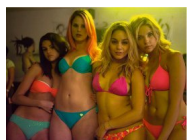


Girls Gone Wilder: "Spring Breakers," "Application," and "The Croods"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 01 April 2013 10:47

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SPRING BREAKERS

At the screening of *Spring Breakers* that I attended, I counted eight viewers who walked out of the movie, and stayed out, well before the end credits rolled. In all honesty, I'm amazed the tally wasn't higher than that. The movie being touted in print and in trailers promises a rowdy, randy romp in the sun with built-in audience-grabbers: Disney princesses acting nasty! James Franco with cornrows and grillz! But the movie that writer/director Harmony Korine has actually made – despite, indeed, its also being a rowdy, randy romp in the sun – bears so little relation to its cheeky, borderline-innocuous advertising campaign that patrons can be easily forgiven for feeling badly misled and deciding to bolt. It would be like going to see

Dumbo

and instead getting Gus Van Sant's
Elephant

That being said, my heart does go out to the *Spring Breakers* marketing team, because how on Earth *do you promote this film?* In outline, Korine's tale is every bit the kinda-frothy, kinda-spiky outing its ads suggest: Four bored, excitement-seeking BFFs (played by Ashley Benson, Rachel Korine, and former Disney starlets Selena Gomez and Vanessa Hudgens) hit St. Petersburg, Florida, during spring break, and after a run-in with the law find themselves uncomfortably indebted to a thuggish

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wannabe-rapper named Alien (whom the exceptional Franco plays as if truly from outer space). That description, though, doesn't hint at the dazzling complexity of Korine's alternately hilarious and horrifying mood piece – or even that it

is
a hilarious and horrifying mood piece. A little bit Sofia Coppola, a little bit David Lynch, a little bit Darren Aronofsky, and quite a bit of *Girls Gone Wild* volumes one through whatever, *Spring Breakers* is an unclassifiable, sometimes exhilarating contradiction, a work that both satirizes and revels in its depictions of copious, heedless (American) consumption and the fantasy of consequence-free living. It's occasionally a mess, but it might be a brilliant mess.

For much of the movie, Korine's and editor Douglas Crise's rhythms are deliberately off-putting, and cinematographer Benoît Debie's garish, Dayglo color schemes, with images popping in and out of focus, keep you woozy and off-balance; the filmmakers create a visual, and rather remarkable, approximation of having spent hours under a blistering sun, high on tequila and the freedom of youth. But *Spring Breakers'* uncomfortable, eventually terrifying subtext is revealed early on. Lacking sufficient funds for their planned Florida trek, three of our four protagonists decide to rob a local restaurant; sporting ski masks and brandishing water pistols, two of the girls raid the cash register and force diners to hand over their wallets, and Korine shows us the sight from the interior of their getaway car, which the third girl is driving in a slow circle around the establishment. It's a miniature tour-de-force sequence, perfectly shot and timed. But it grows exponentially in meaning when Korine, in a flashback scene later in the movie, re-stages the crime from the restaurant's interior, and we witness just how ferocious that robbery truly was. Shrieking at their victims and pressing guns against their heads, and demolishing tabletops with a crowbar we didn't even realize was in their possession, our "heroines" here display a sociopathic recklessness that lands like a kick to the gut, as if we were being told, "All bets are off, folks." And from that moment, everything we witness in

Spring Breakers – especially our leads' dealings with Franco's Alien, a nightmarishly charismatic figure whom they're both attracted to and repelled by – vibrates with tension and danger and the queasy thrill of the unexpected. You feel enormous relief when Gomez's (too-obviously named) Faith hightails it for home halfway through the picture, because she's the one character you're praying will emerge from her spring-break experience unscathed. You also somewhat *dread* her leaving, because God only knows what's in store for her three pals.

There are times, particularly during the numerous slow-motion beachfront scenes of nubile coeds awash in beer and tanning oil, when it's unclear if Korine is mocking exploitation cinema or merely adding to the canon (maybe both), and times when his meditative pacing occasionally drifts into languorousness; every so often, the movie feels shapeless and vague. But it's been

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months – and, among wide-release options at the cineplex, many, *many* months – since I've viewed a movie quite this adventurous and brave, and quite this resonant. (Korine suggests that the seemingly vacuous party monsters familiar from decades of clichéd spring-break entertainments are, in truth,

actual

monsters.) You might easily echo the sentiments of the dude – “gentleman” being too charitable a term – who sat behind me at my screening and, upon watching Franco fellate the handguns held by Hudgens and Benson, shouted, “Oh, what the

f---

?!?” But whether he hated

Spring Breakers

or not, I bet he'll never forget it. I'm betting you won't either.



ADMISSION

Tina Fey and Paul Rudd star in director Paul Weitz's romantic comedy *Admission*, and here's *m*

y admission: I enjoy Fey so much that the movie would've probably needed to be ungodly terrible for me not to have a fine time. Instead, it's merely formulaic and bland, but also, at least, filled with great things. Fey plays a Princeton admissions officer who becomes convinced that a student from Rudd's alternative-education high school is the child she once gave up for adoption, and the film hits all of its expected beats right on schedule; from the leads' tentative courtship to Fey's wary bonding with her maybe-offspring to the inevitable Career Crisis and Learning of Lessons, nothing that happens here should come as a surprise. But as with a long-running sitcom in which familiarity accounts for a large part of its appeal (like

30 Rock

, perhaps?), Weitz's offering, which boasts witty dialogue by screenwriter Karen Croner, still provides plenty of good-natured and genial fun, and is peppered with sensational fringe touches (like

30 Rock definitely

). It was a marvelous decision, for instance, to have Fey's mom portrayed by Lily Tomlin, who matches the star in comic temperament and is damned near priceless here as the spirit of the '70s incarnate. Casting Michael Sheen as Fey's phlegmatic live-in boyfriend was another inspired touch: Remember Sheen as Liz Lemon's disastrous “settling soulmate” Wesley Snipes? And while I wish that his character wasn't fashioned to be quite so faultless, as it

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makes their playful badinage feel lopsided, the charmingly low-key Rudd proves an excellent foil for Fey's funny, empathetic, yet tightly wound recruiter; while the programmatic nature of the script keeps you from fully buying their relationship, it's difficult to bitch very hard when you can't stop smiling. "Perfectly pleasant" might seem like a somewhat insulting description, but in *Admission*

's case, it's both apt and meant as a compliment. Weitz's movie may be flopping in theaters, yet when it eventually lands on TV – where it'll likely play 'til doomsday – you might find it difficult to switch channels.



THE CROODS

The animated Stone Age comedy *The Croods* is a gigantic hit, and beyond the fact that every other animated movie released nowadays seems to be a gigantic hit, it's not hard to see why. Fast-paced, colorful, and graced with a lovely, spunky voice-over performance by Emma Stone, this entertainment that details early (wo)man's graduation from cave-dwelling inconveniences is cheerful and sweet, and handily tickles little kids' funny bones without – and here's a shocker – resorting to incessant fart jokes and a climactic dance-off. All told, it isn't bad, and matters are helped further by the enjoyable vocal contributions of the nicely breezy Ryan Reynolds, Catherine Keener, Cloris Leachman, and that great young comic Clark Duke. But for heaven's sake, couldn't writers/directors Kirk De Micco and Chris Sanders have come up with a more involving narrative for their saga than Stone's Eep wanting to escape the well-meaning tyranny of her overprotective father (Nicolas Cage) who hopes to keep his little girl sheltered forever? Wasn't this tiresome conceit already decades old by time Disney's

The Little Mermaid

got to it? Traditional is one thing, but for a movie that espouses the joys of progress, the storytelling in the otherwise snappy

The Croods

feels downright prehistoric.

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For reviews of "G.I. Joe: Retaliation" and "The Host," visit "[Gee, I Didn't Hate Joe](#) ."

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