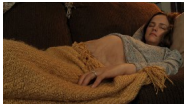


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**January 17, 10:05 a.m.-ish:** If it's January, it must be time for our annual demonic-possession thriller in the guise of a "documentary," and yet it still seems strange to be watching

***Devil's Due***

. The devil may be, but a mere two weeks after the release of the latest *Paranormal Activity*, were we audiences really due for another of these things?

Five minutes into directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin's and Tyler Gillett's outing, though, I realize something: This is a low-budget scare flick with real actors. *Good* actors. Allison Miller and *Friday Night Lights*

' Zach Gilford are terrifically sweet as newlyweds whose Dominican Republic honeymoon results in an embryonic gift from Satan. (Guess

they forgot to declare

*that*

at the airport.) And even the most minor roles are well-cast, with veteran TV actor Sam Anderson – one of the

*Lost*

castaways, and the Fonzie-obsessed doctor who delivered Phoebe's babies on

*Friends* –

especially fine as a priest who hugs Miller and suffers a violent nosebleed and stroke for his kindness. In the end, it's all as silly and unsatisfying as you'd expect. But at least there are some solid scares and a few surprising,

*Chronicle*

-style effects. Plus, while the found-footage element is expectedly frustrating (our clueless parents-to-be would recognize their little miracle as demon spawn if they'd, you know, actually

Written by Mike Schulz

Saturday, 18 January 2014 18:08

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*watch*

what they're recording), it does inspire one killer shot: a grocery-store-surveillance image of Miller tearing open and devouring a package of uncooked ground beef in front of a fascinated little boy. I leave relieved at the not-so-bad-ness of

*Devil's Due*

, and immediately text my expectant friends that the movie may not be the best idea for their next date night.



**12:15 p.m.-ish:** Time for ***Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit***, a reboot of Tom Clancy's spy-thriller series that previously found Alec Baldwin, Ben Affleck, and Harrison Ford (twice) playing the CIA analyst. Now it's Chris Pine's turn. Works for me. The guy is alert and focused, and manages to suggest, sensationally, a timid desk jockey getting his feet wet as an action stud; I particularly love how Pine's hands reflexively shake after Ryan kills his first assailant. But while they were rebooting the franchise, did quite so many clichés have to be rebooted along with it? Working from a script by Adam Cozad and David Koepp (not based on a Clancy novel), director/co-star Kenneth Branagh – whose Russian baddie's Master Plan involves a plot to crash America's economy – is clearly going for a tone of retro, Cold War paranoia, with operatives surreptitiously passing secret information, Kevin Costner's CIA bigwig whispering hushed exposition, and Ryan's girlfriend (Keira Knightley) distracting Branagh by batting her eyes while Ryan steals files from the man's computer. Yet while it's competently filmed, *Shadow Recruit*

just appears to be going through the origin-story motions, and despite Pine's gifts, Ryan himself displays no real personality, lacking the confident charm of James Bond, the empathetic anxiety of Jason Bourne, or even the unintentionally hilarious egocentrism of Tom Cruise's Jack Reacher. During the film, characters are seen watching

*Sorry, Wrong Number*

and

*Rosemary's Baby*

. Either of those, I thought, would've been preferable entertainment.



**2-ish:** I'm at a surprisingly well-populated screening of ***Ride Along***, director Tim Story's high-concept buddy comedy in which a gruff cop (Ice Cube) tests his future brother-in-law's mettle by inviting this shrieking bundle of nerves (Kevin Hart) to a day of street detail. And the film proves just as funny as its trailers, which I don't mean as a compliment. I do smile occasionally; Hart's feeble efforts at a shooting range are mildly amusing (especially when he tries to lift a Smith & Wesson that's roughly half his size), and the comedian is really inspired

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when his character is high on morphine, as it forces the famous motormouth to score laughs by, for once, actually *slowing*  
*down* his

deliveries.

*Ride Along*

, however,

is still blandly formulaic and instantly forgettable, and I spend most of its 100 minutes thinking that, for we Ice Cube fans,

*22 Jump Street*

can't arrive soon enough.



**4:15-ish:** My quadruple feature ends with the animated comedy *The Nut Job*, the tale of a grouchy squirrel (Will Arnett) whose Wile E. Coyote attempts at thievery cause him to learn about Sharing with Others and Respecting Your Friends and yadda yadda yadda. Ten minutes in, given the movie's incessant nut-related puns and off-putting sound quality (half the characters seem to be talking from under paper bags) and weird color schemes (purple and green rodents?!), I expect director Peter Lepeniotis' offering to be the day's cinematic low. Amazingly, it turns out to be the high. To be sure, that isn't major praise. But the 1950s, Damon Runyon-esque details are smart and clever, Maya Rudolph's jovial readings as a deferential bulldog are full of surprise (the less said about Katherine Heigl's, however, the better), and in a genre astonishment, the pacing actually becomes less hyperactive as

*The Nut Job*

progresses, leading to a finale that's not only charming, but damned near *moving*

. I exit the auditorium quite contented, and pray that nobody notices me brushing away that tear.

**6:15-ish:** I arrive home glad to be done with movies for the day, and happily attack the periodical waiting for me in my mailbox. Ah, *Film Comment* ... .

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