

## Bee Prepared: "Bad Words," "Enemy," and "Sabotage"

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 31 March 2014 08:41

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### ***BAD WORDS***

It's not impossible to make a comedy centered on an angry, sullen, emotionally inaccessible bastard, as Oscar Isaac recently proved in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In that film, however, Isaac had a Coen-brothers script and a bunch of sensational folk songs to help carry him through. In *Bad Words*

, director/star Jason Bateman merely has a half-workable comic conceit and access to unlimited profanities. The anger, sullenness, and inaccessibility, I'm sorry to say, win out.

Considering that, prior to seeing the movie, I giggled at several previews for *Bad Words* – screenwriter Andrew Dodge's tale of a bitter 40-year-old who, through a rulebook technicality, is allowed to compete and triumph in grade-school spelling bees – I was a bit surprised when I didn't wind up laughing even once during Bateman's directorial debut. (The insults, when heard out of context, did have some comedic bite.) But from the moment his Guy Trilby shows up on-screen, defiantly unpleasant and obviously harboring some secret grudge against the whole spelling-bee ecosystem, it's unclear whether either Bateman the actor or Bateman the director even

wants

us to laugh. Trilby lobs a few generic crudities toward bee officiators and the contestants' parents, and undermines a chubby kid's confidence by making fun of his weight, but the tone for these scenes seems to stem directly from Bateman's unsmiling mug and the rat-a-tat blitheness of his deliveries. We sense from the film's start that Trilby, an insufferable asshole with a

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photographic memory, is in

*pain*

, and getting no happy release from his tireless parade of wretched behavior, and consequently, to put it mildly, he's not a terribly amusing or interesting comic figure. Llewyn Davis at least found occasional joy in his music. Guy Trilby is like one of those glum-faced, self-adoring guys who makes an obvious show of moping around at a party until someone finally asks, "What's wrong?" ... and who makes the listener immediately regret asking once the cause of his depression is verbalized. (I'll spare your sleepless nights over the mystery of Trilby: He has daddy issues. How do you spell "painfully obvious"?)

I recently had a conversation with a friend in which we discussed how you don't have to like fictional protagonists as long as you find some way to empathize with them, or at least understand their actions. (Does anyone really "like" Blanche DuBois or Willy Loman?) But *Bad Words*

features a lead who's unlikable

*and*

un-empathetic

*and*

whose actions, for too much of the movie, you don't understand, and so despite Bateman's undeniable skill and timing in front of the camera, he quickly becomes tiresome, and likely would've been even if he had funnier things to say. The movie, as I guess it had to, eventually tries to soften Trilby with the arrival of a potential friend: an Indian competitor played by the scene-swiping Rohan Chand. This adorable moppet grins with delight when ordered by Trilby to shut his "curry hole" and stares with open-mouthed wonder when, thanks to his middle-aged companion, he's allowed to stare at a hooker's bare breasts; the unaffected, unflappable Chand is the best reason to see the movie. But he's not enough to override its paucity of narrative interest, or its general misogyny (the film's only women of note – played by the estimable Kathryn Hahn, Allison Janney, and Rachael Harris – are all treated abominably), or its overall spirit of glumness ... . I have more words for the film, but I'll refrain from using them because, perhaps fittingly, nearly all of them are bad ones.



**ENEMY**

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In director Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy*, which is based on José Saramago's novella *The Double*, Jake Gyllenhaal plays a quiet, dour history professor who becomes both transfixed and terrified upon the discovery of his doppelgänger: a bit-part film actor (also played by Gyllenhaal) with the professor's exact same facial features, voice, and chest scar. As last fall's

*Prisoners*

, also directed by Villeneuve, was one of the most hypnotic thrillers I'd seen in years, and Gyllenhaal has been on such a sensational roll of late that two of him promised to be even better than one, I entered this unexpected art-film booking – currently playing at Moline's Nova 6 Cinemas – all but slaving for some eerie, mind-bending fun. A half-hour into it, I was struggling not to laugh. After another half-hour, I was struggling to stay alert. After another half-hour, the end credits came, and I thought, "Thank

God.

" (A thought, given the maddening climax, preceded by, "

Huh

?!?"

Saramago is the Nobel Prize-winning author whose 1995 novel *Blindness* was turned into a 2008 film, so maybe, for my tastes, his works simply

can't

be translated on-screen; as with

*Blindness*

, I spent much of my time at the simultaneously portentous and pretentious

*Enemy*

wondering why everyone talked with such inhuman deliberateness, and why characters always seemed to have the least sensible reactions to every given situation. (When, in screenwriter Javier Gullón's adaptation, the lookalikes meet in a hotel room for their first face-to-face encounter, why does neither of them think to turn on a light? And why, when Gyllenhaal #2 suggests that they might be brothers, does Gyllenhaal #1 dismiss the idea with a curt "No," when the possibility hasn't been remotely explored?) But unless you're already a fan of Saramago's novella – and granting the film its gorgeous, amber-hued photography and our lead's creepy, shifty performance(s) – I can't imagine what anyone would get from

*Enemy*

except maybe a migraine; the movie is too plodding to be gripping, and too intentionally inscrutable to be satisfying. There are giant spiders and an

*Eyes Wide Shut*

-y party and the inarguably beautiful sights of the naked Mélanie Laurent and Sarah Gadon, and somehow, the movie is

still

as exhausting as could be.

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### **SABOTAGE**

As should come as no surprise, Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the brutally violent and spectacularly dumb action thriller *Sabotage*, proves incapable of getting the Austrian out of his speaking voice. But is it possible that the man also, now, only *hears*

in Austrian? No matter what response from Ah-nold is called for in director David Ayer's outing, it appears to be the wrong one: The star gives incongruously chipper readings after receiving bad news, bellows with indignation when presented with routine exposition, blithely smokes his stogie while surrounding characters shriek ... . Schwarzenegger seems less in a different movie than his co-stars here than in an altogether different

*country*

, and his disregard for this most basic of acting tools – the ability to *listen* –

would almost certainly be even more risible if anywhere-other-than-*Sabotage*

didn't seem like the preferable place to be. The less said about this gory, senseless tale of systematic murder involving a corrupt special-ops team, the better; the movie is a dismal waste of familiar faces (Sam Worthington, Josh Holloway) and even more actual talents (Terrence Howard, Mireille Enos, Olivia Williams, Harold Perrineau, Martin Donovan), and even for a Schwarzenegger opus, the dialogue – both the unintentionally-funny and the theoretically funny – falls resoundingly flat. (Although I should mention that when one character blasted a bad guy's brains out and said, "Cleanup in aisle three," someone at my screening did actually laugh. I'm still in shock.) Oh, and characters scream “

*F---!*

” with such laborious regularity and excess that you may feel like never uttering the word again.

Except, perhaps, if you want to say, “F--- you,

*Sabotage*

.”

For a review of Noah, visit “ [There's Gonna Be a Floody, Floody](#) .”

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