

Taking One for the Team: "Draft Day," "Oculus," "Rio 2," and "Mysteries of the Unseen World"

Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 13 April 2014 13:59

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DRAFT DAY

Draft Day casts Kevin Costner as the Cleveland Browns' general manager on the titular day in which his professional and personal crises reach their boiling points. And 20 minutes before its climax, director Ivan Reitman's pro-football saga lands on what is simultaneously its most ironic and most perverse moment, which finds a roomful of executives and analysts bickering about a potential trade, and Costner's Sonny Weaver Jr. ending the squabble with the incensed directive "Just give me a moment of silence so I can think!" The moment is ironic because, to this point, the movie has already been *flooded* with silence. The moment is also perverse because, after 90 minutes of pause-heavy introspection and hushed build-up – with the audience all but slaving for a scene of biting, fast-paced bickering –

now

is when Sonny demands some quiet?

In outline, and especially for sports (and sports-movie) fans, *Draft Day* would seem all but irresistible. Given its subject's inherent, behind-the-scenes drama and ticking-clock appeal, I entered Reitman's latest hoping for something akin to a feature-length take on Brad Pitt's and Jonah Hill's panicked/exhilarated trade-agreement sequence in *Moneyball*

. (And Lord how I wish that film's Aaron Sorkin and Steven Zaillian were also given a crack at this script, credited to Rajiv Joseph and Scott Rothman.) But despite the one that routinely appears on-screen, counting down the minutes until Sonny and his fellow managers begin gambling on their teams' futures, a ticking clock – at least a figurative one – is precisely what

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this logy, sentimental effort doesn't possess. I guess I applaud the filmmakers for their attempts at verisimilitude, and for not saddling their outing with too much manufactured, rat-a-tat sitcom banter; with its real-world rhythms and employment of actual NFL team names, locales, and personalities,

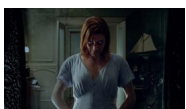
Draft Day

feels "real." But "real" isn't the same as "entertaining," and as you slog through the plodding pacing while Sonny ruminates on whether to recruit a new quarterback, or give up his first-round draft pick, or make a commitment to his newly pregnant girlfriend (Jennifer Garner), you may find yourself longing for some good, old-fashioned sitcom phoniness. This is a movie in which Denis Leary – one of the fastest-talking actors on the planet – plays an embittered head coach, and even

he

sounds as though he's speaking at half-speed after a lengthy nap.

Reitman makes clever use of his film's split-screen effects and elicits a solid, engaging portrayal from Costner, with the supporting cast offering universally fine work; Chadwick Boseman, doing a low-key riff on Cuba Gooding Jr. in *Jerry Maguire*, is especially strong, and I also adored Frank Langella, whose intimidating Browns owner – like the actor himself – proves too cool to ever remove his sunglasses. Plus, Reitman and company get some enjoyable, much-needed momentum going during their final scenes of trade negotiations, in which we're finally given a reprieve from all the preceding, tedious soap opera, and you can feel the audience collectively rousing itself back to full attention. The extended climax, though somewhat predictable in its particulars, is just juicy enough to fool you, momentarily, into thinking that the whole film was this good. Yet its finale and sheen of professionalism aren't quite enough to make up for the movie's overall lack of drive, or its cutesy contrivances (Costner's and Garner's secretive tête-à-têtes are continually, "comically" interrupted by a nerdy intern played by Griffin Newman), or its tired scenes of familial and romantic discord that should make any self-respecting sports fan want to bolt the auditorium immediately. "No one can stop a ticking clock," says Sonny in the film, "but the great ones find ways to slow it down." I suppose, here, that would make Reitman one of the great ones, because *Draft Day* has slowness in spades.



OCULUS

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Director/co-writer Mike Flanagan's fright film *Oculus*, the tale of a murderous vanity mirror that has purportedly caused the deaths of 45 people over 400 years, has an insidious creepiness ... and an

Insidious

creepiness. Like that 2010 scare-flick hit, this new supernatural offering toggles between real and imagined planes of existence, and its horrors don't sneak up on you so much as stare you in the face and force you to stare back, even when your nerves are too frayed to want to; in its B-movie way, the movie boasts some of the primal power of last summer's expert genre release

The Conjuring

. Unlike

Insidious

, though, and

certainly

unlike that film's über-ridiculous 2013 sequel,

Oculus

is almost wholly devoid of camp. (You can count the movie's jokes on the fingers of one hand, and for once, that actually proves to be a

good

thing.) Despite the film's admittedly silly premise, Flanagan and his topnotch actors – particularly the freaky, fiercely committed Karen Gillan and Katee Sackhoff – attack their material with rather devastating seriousness of intent and little overt manipulation, earning jolts and jumps without making you feel like a sucker. And while Flanagan's and Jeff Howard's screenplay leans toward the over-explicit, at least in terms of exposition, the director delivers an incredibly artful dovetailing of the movie's twinned narratives, and shrewdly reserves his most bracing moments of on-screen ickiness for pains that viewers can empathetically, emphatically relate to. (If you still shudder thinking of that time you broke your fingernail in a way that produced blood, or that time you accidentally sliced your tongue while licking an envelope, you may want to avert your eyes several times here.)

Oculus

is terrific, low-rent fun, and its enjoyment may have even been prophesied with the casting of Garrett Ryan, who plays a troubled young son and looks uncannily like Haley Joel Osment did at the time of

The Sixth Sense

. The difference, though, is that Ryan's character

doesn't

see dead people. The poor bastard.

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