

THE ADVENTURES OF ROCKY AND BULLWINKLE – One of the few really entertaining releases of the summer, and of course, almost no one has seen it. In this update of the popular TV cartoon, director Des McAnuff and his screenwriters have a field day with the film's escalating series of verbal puns and visuals riffs, and there are enjoyable turns by the likes of Robert De Niro, Rene Russo (born to play Natasha), and Piper Pearbo. While the film's roster of guest stars yields little humor, and it doesn't hold a candle to the frenzied delirium of the TV show, there are numerous laugh-out-loud funny moments, and when you're not laughing, you're likely to be smiling.

BIG MOMMA'S HOUSE – Depressingly familiar and unsurprising, even though Martin Lawrence is finally showing signs of becoming an actual actor. You can forgive the hokiness of the setup, but you can't forgive how shamelessly it rips off several other, better movies, or the fact that it just isn't very funny. Raja Gosnell is credited as the director, but that's a little too generous – it doesn't appear that there was a director. With the estimable talents of Paul Giamatti, Nia Long, and Terrence Howard duly wasted, the film stumbles along to its protracted finale, where you're just grateful that it's all coming to a close.

BOYS AND GIRLS – A wretched amalgam of *When Harry Met Sally ...*, *Say Anything ...*, and hundreds of other romantic comedies that *don't*

have an ellipsis in their titles. It's so stupidly written and horrifically plotted that the audience I saw the film with actually grew a little hostile; you know the filmmakers have no idea what they're doing when they cast

Buffy

's Alyson Hannigan and

Blair Witch

's Heather Donahue in minor roles and don't let them do a thing. Instead, far too much time is spent with those screen vacuums Freddie Prinze Jr. and Jason Biggs, and leading lady Claire Forlani will be lucky if this witless spectacle disappears from her resume immediately.

CENTER STAGE – Dance musicals can get away with a lot if the footwork is spectacular enough, and this entry from director Nicholas Hytner is a prime example. Most of the movie is terrible, with dreary plotting, laborious "twists," and generally flat acting. Very little of that matters, though, because the film does well by its dancers and its commitment to their passion, and Hytner knows where to put the camera to give the audience a charge. Even when the choreographed numbers border on the awful, you can get tremendous enjoyment out of their performance, especially the work of Ethan Stiefel, whose stage brilliance looks effortless. Silly and predictable, and still a kick.

CHICKEN RUN – Kids will eat this claymation comedy up, and adults might even have a better time. The unapologetically British humor and wordplay gives you some of the same delight you'll find in *The Black Adder* or *Fawlty Towers*, and with that genius Nick Park at the helm, it's a visual feast as well as a verbal one. Mel Gibson does some splendid vocal work as the mistakenly heroic lead chicken (which helps atone for his

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going-through-the-motions appearance in

The Patriot

), and he's supported by a top-tier group of British thespians, none better than wacky Jane Horrocks. It's a little film with great big pleasures.

COYOTE UGLY – So absolutely up-front about its retrograde, Reagan-Bush-era tackiness that it almost works. Almost. It's a songwriter's version of *Flashdance*, where the perky upstart must embrace her down-and-dirty nature to make her dreams come true, and damned if perky Piper Pearbo doesn't pull the role off. The film has producer Jerry Bruckheimer's usual gracelessness and vapidness, and the song selections are a middle-aged producer's idea of "hip," but there are some crackerjack supporting players (the best being Maria Bello and John Goodman), and director David McNally does his best to make it good-looking trash.

DINOSAUR – The worst animated Disney film in over a decade and a half and, naturally, a big hit. Despite the generally wonderful digital effects, it has all the earmarks of a typical Disney production, minus the wit: the orphaned-mammal set-up; the plot that revolves around a trek to a better world; the hipster supporting animals; the ultra-cute romantic nuzzling against an obnoxious musical score; the present-day references in a years-ago setting. Am I the only one who can't bear to watch this same tired, hackneyed formula in movie after movie? With vocal work by D.B. Sweeney, Della Reese, and even a few *good* actors.

DISNEY'S THE KID – Pretty much everything about this schmaltzy movie is loathsome, except the actual performance of it. Bruce Willis plays the man who longs to hug his inner child, and gives a nice, dry-comic portrayal of a narcissistic creep, and there's a group of terrifically talented actresses in support, including Lily Tomlin, Emily Mortimer, Dana Ivey, Melissa McCarthy, and the dazzling Jean Smart. They might keep you amused, but you'll be bemoaning the clunkiness of the film itself; if he could, that hideously sentimental director Jon Turteltaub would take a vise to your eyeballs and *force* the tears out.

FANTASIA 2000 – The only thing lamentable about this updating of the 1940 animated classic is that it's no longer being presented on IMAX screens. (Of course, if it were, we wouldn't have gotten to see it here anyway.) Best new scenes: the Al Hirshfield-influenced "Rhapsody in Blue" segment, Respighi's "Pines of Rome" as a water ballet for whales, and "Pomp and Circumstance," which lends way to a surprisingly strong and funny retelling of the Ark tale with Donald Duck as Noah. Listening to great music, watching great animation, and doing it in under 80 minutes – *that's* entertainment.

GLADIATOR – A pungent and entertaining historical epic. Russell Crowe stars as the slave-turned-vengeful-warrior Maximus, and his is an action-hero star turn in the best possible sense; he gets great variety out of his line readings and is completely believable as an ass-kicker. Director Ridley Scott stages the battle scenes with such verve that they grab you by their sheer magnitude and often-brutal beauty, and the juicy simplicity of the storyline is a real grabber. At times, it's rather primitive moviemaking, with numerous bits of bummers dialogue, but it has grit and passion and it really moves; audiences seem to agree.

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GONE IN 60 SECONDS – No one really expects depth in a summertime thriller about the hijacking of luxury cars from uber-producer Jerry Bruckheimer, but wouldn't you at least expect some excitement? Dominic Sena's pic substitutes editing for action, and the incoherence of the cutting only makes the incoherence of the plotting even more annoying; the only imaginative theft on display is the filmmakers' stealing all the natural talent and charisma out of a cast that features Nicolas Cage, Angelina Jolie, Giovanni Ribisi, Robert Duvall, and many others. Like Bruckheimer's more recent *Coyote Ugly*, the film is like something out of an '80s time warp, and it should have stayed there.

HOLLOW MAN – Director Paul Verhoeven has again raised the bar on state-of-the-art visual effects and graphic bloodshed; he has seen the future, and it makes us queasy. But the ineptitude of the script is the most nauseating thing about this Invisible Man update, with wretched dialogue and uninspired plotting throughout. Kevin Bacon does well as the token mad scientist, but co-star Elisabeth Shue, playing a genetic-research assistant (!), is unbelievably miscast. The film's visuals do count for a lot, particularly when Bacon's character is nearly visible, but the movie itself is, as the title suggests, completely empty.

THE IN CROWD – What *Beverly Hills 90210* would have been like if Brenda and Kelly slept with their therapists and had access to weaponry, but nowhere near as fun. The movie doesn't have the energy to play as camp; it barely has the energy to play. This PG-13 version of *Wild Things*, *Cruel Intentions*, and the like is draggy and humdrum throughout, and makes the mistake of taking itself seriously – a fatal error. While Mary Lambert's fetishistic direction of the actors' torsos is good for some tasteless leering, it's all forgettable and tame; it gives Tacky Crap a bad name.

LOSER – Fast-talking teens in love under the direction of Amy Heckerling; it shouldn't have been this bland. But the characters are nothing but one-dimensional stereotypes (unusual from the woman who brought us *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Clueless*), and the plotting is nothing you haven't seen a thousand times before. Plus, it stars Jason Biggs as the head dork, and his overpracticed schmuckiness is already exasperating. Thankfully, Mena Suvari is on hand to give the proceedings a bit of life; her delicate balancing act – looking like she simultaneously knows more than her years and knows nothing at all – deserves a role and movie far better than this one.

ME, MYSELF, AND IRENE – Jim Carrey pulls off some amazing physical-comedy routines here, and his working overtime comes as a relief to the audience, because writer-directors Peter and Bobby Farrelly don't seem to be working hard at all. Like most of their efforts, this one is visually uninspired and way too long, and the Farrellys still seem unable to write anything more than funny moments – funny characters and stories are still beyond them. Truth be told, a few of those moments (especially those involving the near-dead cow and Carrey's braniac children) are really funny, but the film is still less than the sum of its Good Parts.

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE 2 – It was designed to be the biggest hit of the summer and, as of now, it is, but do you know anyone who really loves it? After a terrific opening 15 minutes, the

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film disintegrates into parody played straight, with the merging of director John Woo (as usual, overdoing his brand of languid-yet-kinetic shtick), screenwriter Robert Towne (whose dialogue is atypically bum), and star Tom Cruise (a joke as a hipster badass) proving to be unintentionally hilarious. There's an overreaching desperation in the staging and performance of this sequel; it's a grubby action flick that thinks it's art.

NUTTY PROFESSOR II: THE KLUMPS – The novelty value is understandably diminished in this follow-up, but when star Eddie Murphy is as brilliant as he is here, who's gonna bitch? Playing all the members of the Klump family and Sherman's id Buddy Love, Murphy pulls off a series of magnificent comic performances, each caricature fully defined and lived-in, and makes it easy enough to ignore the plot, which is filled with pseudo-realistic scientific explanations and a few comic ideas too many, and the general crumminess of Peter Segal's direction. The movie itself is mediocre, but Murphy and that amazing make-up artist Rick Baker turn it into one of the summer's few bright spots.

THE PATRIOT – A big, expensive, almost completely worthless debacle (though many moviegoers, and several critics, would disagree). For all its grandeur and noble aspirations, Roland Emmerich's Revolutionary War saga is maddening in its obviousness, its telegraphing of cliches, its lethargic pacing, its insanely overbearing musical score (by John Williams, naturally), its uninspired cast (even Mel Gibson disappoints), et cetera. With the exception of the often-impressive visual design, the only joy I took in the film was watching the boom mike at the top of the screen nearly knock the actors in the head; it's Emmerich and screenwriter Robert Rodat who should be conked.

THE PERFECT STORM – Cliche-ridden, oddly edited, mostly messy, and still entertaining, even thrilling. Director Wolfgang Petersen shows in great detail the responsibilities, and occasional terrors, of being a seaman, and there are a number of startling visual effects that are given true power by being caught up in the travails of the Andrea Gail crew; the storm sequences are exciting on an emotional level as well as a purely visceral one. By the time the "perfect storm" hits, though, you'll have had to sit through some mind-numbing cliches, half-baked characters, and portentous speechifying – do so, and you'll be in for a helluva ride.

THE REPLACEMENTS – Perhaps the most moronic movie of a pretty moronic summer. Pro football players are replaced by scabs, and the movie's hateful message is that we should adore this odious bunch of losers because they're lovable screw-ups just like you. You know you're in trouble when Gene Hackman's trademark staccato laugh – *he h heh heh heh heh* – sounds unusually desperate, and when Keanu Reeves

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isn't

the worst performer on screen. (That would be the usually good Jon Favreau.) The movie is a smug and dumbed-down version of movies that were smug and dumbed-down to begin with, and I wanted to throw something heavy and messy at the screen.

ROAD TRIP – Scatalogical humor can be all well and good, but when it's thrown in merely for shock effect and has nothing to do with a film's characters or plot – as it does here – you're offended on a number of different levels. (Even the inappropriateness of the jokes wouldn't be so bad if they were *funny*.) The movie grows more and more monotonous and desperate as it progresses, much like its nominal star Tom Green, and it wastes the very real talents of Breckin Meyer, stuck playing straight man to a group of obnoxious creeps.

SCARY MOVIE – An amazingly popular horror spoof, but in actuality a strange and lazy little work. First off, you can't parody movies (like *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*) that were parodies to begin with. And second, you get no satiric points for filming scenes exactly the way they were filmed the first time around. Director Keenan Ivory Wayans and the screenwriters show that they've seen the same movies we have. Uh ... great. But despite a few laughs, the movie is aimed solely at the 12-year-old market – insert naked body parts, flatulence, drug humor, and a spoof of *The Matrix*, and voila! Hilarity ensues!

SHAFT – This updating of the blaxploitation classic features two elements absolutely vital for an action blockbuster: a kick-ass hero and kick-ass villains. The first is courtesy of Samuel L. Jackson, with his tremendous combination of talent, looks, humor, and charisma; the second, from Christian Bale, doing a splendidly smarmy riff on his American Psycho playboy, and Jeffrey Wright, hysterically funny and surprisingly sinister. John Singleton stages the action scenes with a lightning pacing but always keeps you aware of what the fights mean to the characters; despite some convoluted plotting, it's great summertime escapism – loud, pulse-quickenning, and frequently hilarious.

SHANGHAI NOON – Decent, light-hearted action-comedy fare, and when star Jackie Chan is pulling off his martial-arts moves, sometimes even better than that. (The man is a special effect all by himself.) He gives what is probably his most enjoyable, confident American star turn to date, and brings a good dash of charm to the movie. That's important, because co-star Owen Wilson's hipper-than-thou attitude is, as usual, a drain on the film, and much of the humor is utterly predictable and borderline racist. It's pleasant enough, though, and it gives Lucy Liu a chance to show some softer sides of her tough-gal persona.

SMALL TIME CROOKS – So light and enjoyable that it was bound to be underrated, Woody Allen's latest is actually a major achievement: a comedy with a tricky, unpredictable narrative, topnotch character performances, wickedly funny one-liners, and a shockingly healthy and vibrant view of long-term marriage. The movie is bliss. With a cast that includes Allen, Tracey Ullman, Hugh Grant, Michael Rapaport, Tony Darrow, Jon Lovitz, Elaine Stritch, and the wonderful Elaine May, it's a work of rare artistry and skill (Zhao Fei's cinematography is

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incredibly rich), and still the best the movies have given us this year.

SPACE COWBOYS – *Really* mediocre. This seniors-in-space opus features some lovely, funny work by its roster of stars – Clint Eastwood, Tommy Lee Jones (nobody's idea of a senior citizen), Donald Sutherland, and James Garner – and some topnotch production design. The story, though, is hackneyed and conventional, and once the characters make it to space, the film becomes an amazingly lethargic clone of *Armageddon*, of all things. While the cast is able to inject some life into even the stalest jokes and most clichéd setups, it's hard to work in a void; the movie becomes more obvious and dull as it drags to its conclusion.

TITAN A.E. – In this animated sci-fi spectacular, there are some effects – the destruction of Earth, a sequence involving exploding hydrogen trees, the finale involving huge ice crystals – that are truly out-of-this-world, and it has a surprisingly bouncy score. They help compensate for the half-baked nonsense plotting, interchangeable characters (Matt Damon, as the lead voice, has never been so bland), and the presence of a mole-like character named Goon, who might be the most monstrously unfunny being of his kind since Jar Jar Binks. A huge box-office bomb, and the definition of the so-so animated flick.

WHAT LIES BENEATH – When did director Robert Zemeckis lose his knack for simply giving audiences a good time? His shock scenes are predictable and tame, the composition is heavy-handed, and the pacing is laborious. Plus, if you've seen those damn trailers that give away the whole supernatural nature of the plot, the film's entire first hour – a *Rear Window*

rip-off – is worthless. Michelle Pfeiffer comes off as little more than a wan, panicky basket case, and Harrison Ford is stuck in his dreary, Serious Actor mode; Diana Scarwid's appearance as Pfeiffer's best friend is the only element in the film that comes close to being a surprise.

X-MEN – Taking on the very daunting task of bringing the beloved comic-book characters to life, director Bryan Singer and screenwriter David Hayter have brought it off with an almost shocking amount of skill. Hayter comes up with some truly great one-liners, and Singer proves to have a sure touch for the fantastic – a scene of cops being attacked by their own weaponry is both hilarious and tension-filled. They're aided by a great cast that includes Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, and star-to-be Hugh Jackman, who strikes exactly the right notes between comic-booky action stud and tortured, realistic hero. Just about perfect summertime entertainment, no matter what the other critics say.