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THE ORIGINAL KINGS OF COMEDY

If *The Original Kings of Comedy*, the filmed preservation of the wildly popular comedy revue, were merely as funny as it is, it would probably stand as the best American movie of the year so far. But director Spike Lee has done something incredibly savvy with the project. Aided by the terrific editor Barry Alexander Brown, Lee has given the material true cinematic fluidity. The editing rhythms are all right on, the camera is always right where it should be to give the performers their biggest laughs (and it seems that Lee has about a hundred different cameras at his disposal), and there are just enough segments with the performers joshing and relaxing off-stage to give the film true dimension; we're aware that their stand-up personas only hint at who they are.

And who are they? Well, The Kings of Comedy are a traveling, African-American comedy troupe, featuring a rotating group of stand-up comic performers, who had been touring the country to sold-out audiences for months. In this film, shot over two nights in Charlotte, North Carolina, the performers in question are Steve Harvey, who also acts as the evening's emcee, D.L. Hughley, Cedric the Entertainer, and Bernie Mac, and together they generate bigger laughs than I've heard in a movie theatre in well over a decade. Though their individual acts all share a common theme – the differences between how blacks and whites see the world and react to it – their styles are all unique, and all hysterical.

Finally! A Great Movie! (And Two More Crummy Ones...): "The Original Kings of Comedy," "The Cell," and

Written by Mike Schulz

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Harvey, who unquestionably has the toughest chore of the night (performing his own routines and also serving as a bridge between the performers' acts), has moments of dumbfounded exasperation at life's stupidities (he's particularly inspired on how soulful, African-American R&B turned into incoherent rap lyrics) and tempers those with a wide-grinned gregariousness that's amazingly charming; Hughley has a show-biz vet's facility and performs some great routines on how blacks and "thrill sports" don't go hand-in-hand ("Bungee-jumping ... that's just a little too much like lynching."); Cedric the Entertainer, the most mellow of the lot, does an immensely quotable bit on how whites "hope" for the best and blacks secretly "wish" for the worst, and pulls off a brilliant bit with a cigarette, a show-stopping example of faux coolness.

And then there's Bernie Mac. While all four performers are, on the evidence here, marvelously talented, Mac comes the closest to showing true genius at the stand-up art form. Going into (real? imagined?) detail about life with his sister's kids, his sexual exhaustion, or how blacks use a particularly descriptive twelve-letter word, Mac is a comedic powerhouse, attacking his subjects with a ferocity that's a little startling. I'd happily watch any of these four in a one-man concert format, but I'm thinking that someone should get Mac a gig like this really soon; this is a superstar in waiting.

Throughout the 100 minutes of *The Original Kings of Comedy*, I had tears of laughter rolling down my cheeks almost continuously; those rare moments when you're not laughing are almost reprieves. Spike Lee has done well to bring this sensational concert to the screen, and done even better by making it, for a filmed concert, as cinematically rich as it is. (My one caveat, shared with most filmed versions of stand-up routines, is too many shots of audience members doubling over laughing.) The movie is more sheer fun than anything else around and, by year's end, is sure to remain one of 2000's absolute best.



THE CELL

Director Tarsem Singh's *The Cell*, a *Matrix*-influenced serial-killer flick, has a unique, sumptuous look provided by, among others, the director and cinematographer Paul Laufer. It's often visually arresting, and it has a suitably creepy Howard Shore score for that

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Silence of the Lambs

feel. A lot of professionals have obviously worked hard to make their genre flick different from the norm. By the time we've reached its beat-the-clock finale, though, the movie stands as a good-looking failure, because the script (credited to Mark Protosevich) has precious little momentum, and the characters all seem lobotomized; there are several fine performers in the cast, but here they all seem as drained of life as the killer's victims.

Jennifer Lopez stars as a child psychologist who, with a group of research scientists, has found a way to enter patients' dreams in an attempt to cure their damaged psyches. And her latest project is a doozy – entering the mind of a serial killer (Vincent D'Onofrio) in order to determine where he's hidden his latest victim-to-be. But the plotting has no push. The dream sequences, while reasonably well-staged, all have the same languid, we'll-get-there-when-we-get-there feel, and while the imagery is occasionally imaginative, it isn't memorable; there's nothing in *The Cell* to compete with the shivers you'd get from, say, David Lynch in his

Twin Peaks

days. And because most of the film's action takes place in the killer's head, and we're consistently reminded that the things Lopez sees aren't real, the film has a disadvantage that it can't recover from; the killer's intended victim might be in trouble, but the film's heroes never are.

Those heroes, by the way, are a well-cast bunch (in addition to Lopez we get Vince Vaughn, Marianne Jean-Baptiste, and Dylan Baker), but the most dramatic performance in the film is given by Lopez's lip gloss; in a couple of scenes, you literally can't take your eyes off it. Actually, that's kind of appropriate, because in the end, *The Cell* is equally lush-looking, and equally transparent.



BLESS THE CHILD

Is there a Hollywood rule that every new "religious" thriller has to seem like the dopiest movie ever made? The latest, Chuck Russell's *Bless the Child*, is some hoey about a little girl who

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has been chosen by God to lead us to salvation, or something, and about the evil cult members who want to use her powers for Satanic purposes. I guess. I never understand the convoluted nonsense in these flicks, be it

Stigmata,

End of Days

, or what have you, but I keep hoping that at least one of them will be brought off with some conviction, or at least a few good scares. I'm still waiting. Let's not dwell on it. Let me just say that lead Kim Basinger again has her touching tremulousness wasted in vapid material, Rufus Sewell gives an embarrassingly over-the-top performance as the head wacko, and the snub-nosed, cloying little girl in the Second Coming role made me absolutely terrified about what might be waiting for us in the afterlife.