Written by Mike Schulz Tuesday, 06 March 2001 18:00



We've had the evidence for years, but I think it's time we made it official: Brad Pitt is a gonzo supporting player stuck in a (rather dull) leading man's body. Recently, he portrayed the heavily-accented Irish boxer in *Snatch*, giving the film a jolt of pure, comedic adrenalin – his screen time was brief, but he was the most entertaining performer in the movie – and when he appeared as a supporting actor in 12 Monkeys, Thelma

& Louise

and

True Romance

(probably his best, and easily his funniest, screen work), his performances were well-calibrated and often inspired. Pitt can display a true flair for off-kilter comedy; it's telling that his most enjoyable lead performance has come from the darkly comic cult film Fight Club

, where his Tyler Durden was clearly one of Pitt's nutjob character roles gone berserk.

However, there are a few problems, let's call them Pitt-falls, with his career: 1) He looks like a Greek god (if you could call that a problem), so he's been cast as a Hollywood hunk in a series of films that required nothing more than a handsome young man in the lead; 2) When he's cast for his looks, for his Brad Pitt-ness, he becomes really uninteresting; and 3) In his star vehicles, he has crummy taste in scripts. He was well-matched opposite a brilliant Morgan Freeman in *Se ven*

(Freeman's marvelous control gave Pitt's awkwardness the proper context), but check out this list:

Kalifornia

Legends of the Fall

Interview with the Vampire

Sleepers

The Devil's Own

Seven Years in Tibet

Meet Joe Black

Notes on Brad, Julia, and "The Mexican"

Written by Mike Schulz Tuesday, 06 March 2001 18:00

... if he wasn't so pretty, could he have possibly maintained his mega-star status with all the dreary performances he gave in these flicks?

He has a new one out now, Gore Verbinski's *The Mexican*, and his dilemma is compounded – not only is he again stuck playing Good-Looking Movie Star in a movie with an unimpressive screenplay, but he's out-acted by a slew of topnotch character actors (James Gandolfini, Bob Balaban, J.K. Simmons, David Krumholtz, an unbilled Gene Hackman) and outmatched in the charisma department by the High Priestess of Charisma herself, Julia Roberts.

This star duo plays Jerry and Samantha, an unmarried couple stuck in a bit of financial trouble. At the film's start, Jerry is assigned by a high-level lowlife (Balaban) to head to Mexico and retrieve a rare pistol that is supposedly cursed; he'll earn big bucks if he succeeds, and he'll be killed if he doesn't. Jerry is a bungler, though, and Samantha believes he'll never get back from Mexico alive, so when he takes off for the border, she leaves to pursue her dream of being a croupier in Las Vegas. For the next 90 minutes, Pitt and Roberts share no screen time together, and I didn't know whether to feel worse for Pitt, stuck in a series of witless situations and exchanges (he's actually required by the script to ask locals for a ride in their "truck-o" to get to the next "town-o"), or for the audience (at least Pitt is getting paid for his involvement).

The one person you don't feel sorry for, though, is Roberts, who is playing a demeaning role with little makeup in subpar material and still looks like she's having a ball. After a string of flops in the early-to-mid-'90s (I doubt anyone will want to revisit *Dying Young*, *I Love Trouble*, *Mary Reilly*

or

Michael Collins

again anytime soon), she came roaring back with a terrific performance in 1997's

My Best Friend's Wedding

and hasn't looked back since; even when she's been miscast (as in

Runaway Bride

) or hindered by tripe (

Stepmom

), she's been confident, witty, and on. (And her bravura turn in

Erin Brockovich

is looking more and more like the best melding of mega-star, character, and performance in the past 10 years.) In

The Mexican

, she, too, is trapped in dopey plotting – en route to Vegas, Samantha is hijacked by the enforcer Leroy (Gandolfini), who initially uses her as insurance to get Jerry back safely with the gun but winds up becoming her bosom pal – but through sheer charm and delightful interplay with Gandolfini, she makes her screen time pass harmlessly and nearly enjoyably.

Notes on Brad, Julia, and "The Mexican"

Written by Mike Schulz Tuesday, 06 March 2001 18:00

In the film's endless series of clichés and rote action-comedy sequences, its one burst of near-invention comes from Leroy, who turns out to be a semi-closeted gay man who alternates his shooting sprees with teary-eyed meditations on the difficulties of finding love. *The Mexican* becomes a different, much more interesting film when Roberts and Gandolfini get to spend quiet moments of reverie together; Leroy might just be an offshoot of Gandolfini's already-legendary Tony Soprano, but he and Roberts have such tremendous rapport that you wish the filmmakers would jettison the Brad Pitt stuff in favor of more scenes between this twosome. (Is it noteworthy that Julia Roberts is much more relaxed and spontaneous in her platonic cinematic pairings – with Gandolfini, Rupert Everett in

My Best Friend's Wedding , and Albert Finney in Erin Brockovich

- than in her romantic pairings?) They partner each other joyfully; it's intrusive when the film's plot kicks back into gear.

It's been reported that Pitt and Roberts drastically cut their salaries to be part of this project, and I think any sane viewer will have no choice but to ask: Why? The leads' roles don't allow them to do anything they haven't before, director Verbinski doesn't show much talent for staging or visual design, with all the supposed "comedy" in the script there isn't a true laugh to be had, and it can't be that Pitt and Roberts were aching to work with each other on a project, since their entire screen time together consists of about 15 minutes. *The Mexican* had a strong opening weekend at the box office, but it won't be anything you'll remember months, or even weeks, down the road. The movie is intriguing only in relation to the current status of its stars: It shows that, at present, Julia Roberts is at the top of her game, and Brad Pitt should beeline to more wacky character roles *pr*

.