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EVOLUTION

The sci-fi comedy *Evolution* is like *Ghostbusters* without Bill Murray, which isn't surprising since both films were directed by Ivan Reitman, but it also means that it's like *Ghostbusters* without the big laughs. In that 1984 blockbuster, Murray delivered his lines with an italicized innuendo that made even his throwaway quips hilarious; without his presence, the film (and its underrated 1989 follow-up) would just have been a moderately pleasant, cheesy, overscaled, haphazardly paced affair. That's *Evolution*.

Reitman's new film opens with a meteor crashing into the Arizona desert, where a down-on-his-luck scientist (David Duchovny) and his partner (Orlando Jones) discover that it's housing an army of alien invaders with the ability to evolve astonishingly quickly into more and more monstrous life forms, and who, natch, have world domination on their agenda. In terms of set-up, *Evolution* has a wickedly funny concept going for it: The film is like *Alien* as scatological comedy, in which you never know what form the little buggers will take, or what orifice they'll invade. (Actually, any viewer acquainted with scatological comedy will have no trouble figuring out that latter part.) And the film's effects are certainly entertaining for long stretches; they combine the outlandish cartooniness of *Men in Black* with the creepy-crawliness of *Starship Troopers*.

Would that Reitman and the screenwriters (Don Jakoby, David Diamond, and David Weissman) paid as much attention to the cast. Even though the *Ghostbusters* movies were, in essence, both completely Murray-centric, performers like Dan Aykroyd (who appears here as the Arizona governor), Harold Ramis, Sigourney Weaver, Annie Potts, Rick Moranis, Peter MacNicol, and Chloe Webb all made significant, comedic contributions that kept them in your memory; here, only Orlando Jones manages to rise above the visuals and get a comic rhythm going. We're treated to the always-welcome Julianne Moore (in the Sigourney Weaver role) playing a klutzy epidemiologist, but the filmmakers apparently decided that simply watching this beautiful actress trip and fall throughout the film was comedy enough. In the fourth Ghostbuster role is

Seann William Scott, and although I'm grateful that it's him instead of Jason Biggs, he grows tiresome almost as quickly.

As for David Duchovny, he would seem the perfect choice to assume Bill Murray's dry-as-a-martini role, but it appears his notorious intellect is working against him; as the film lumbers on to the predictable jokiness of the military getting involved in the alien scuffle, not heeding the warnings of our heroes, the fun inevitably seeps out of Duchovny's performance, and he just looks embarrassed, and rather annoyed, to be there. Even without Duchovny, *Evolution* would resemble a particularly uninspired episode of *The X-Files* (its plot has been lifted, in one form or another, from dozens of the program's past installments); it's what you'd see if the sneaky, subversive humor of that show was replaced with big, dumb gags.

Evolution isn't painful to sit through – the monsters alone give it traces of wit – and it's certainly better than Ivan Reitman's last two ventures, *Six Days, Seven Nights* and *Father's Day*. But it's still unfulfilling and hopelessly retro; visual effects might have come a long way since the days of *Ghostbusters*, but in terms of getting audiences to laugh out loud, Reitman hasn't evolved at all.

THE ANIMAL

Despite how often I've heard the phrase, I've never been a subscriber to the belief that a movie can be "so stupid it's funny." Comedy shouldn't have to be qualified; hey, if it made you laugh, it can't be all that stupid. (Nobody enjoys a stupid *drama*.) And although my editors, bless 'em, never insist that I review a *Little Nicky* or a

Dude, Where's My Car?
, I've certainly sat through enough witless, teen-oriented "comedies" to sniff out a potential loser before it even opens. So Rob Schneider's latest,
The Animal
, recently debuted, and guess what? It's not all that stupid.

Not that the plot is the work of Mensa members, or anything: Schneider plays a police-department file clerk who longs to be a real cop, and who becomes a great one after a debilitating accident requires that his organs, hopelessly crushed, be replaced with animal parts. Suddenly, he can sniff out drug-dealers at a hundred yards, chase down crooks in a flash, and ... yeah, I know ... I said it wasn't all *that* stupid. But ignore the main plotline, and most of the supporting ones, and several gags that just don't work, and you're actually left with a rather buoyant little comedy that showcases Rob Schneider better than any previous film role – or TV role, for that matter – has as of yet.

As someone who never really *got* Schneider, not even when he was makin' copies on *Saturday Night Live*
, the idea of him as a leading man and movie star always struck me as odd. He looks like a slow-witted, schlubby cousin to Jon Stewart, and he doesn't have any discernible comic style; I always thought he was put on
SNL
to atone for the impending loss of Jon Lovitz, although he didn't possess Lovitz's impish, often hysterical self-satisfaction. (He seemed to be apologizing for his comic routines, and oftentimes, he
should
have.) But in
The Animal
, Schneider, aided by some surprisingly effective visuals, gives his animal-trapped-in-a-man's-body more than enough physical gusto, and a few moments, such as his romantic come-on to an unsuspecting goat, are delivered with just enough insinuating ickiness to make you laugh out loud, even if you should know better.

First-time director Luke Greenfield keeps *The Animal* moving at a pleasant clip – running less than 90 minutes, the movie doesn't overstay its welcome – and shows a good deal of visual invention; I never thought I'd find the clichéd car-falling-off-the-cliff scene funny again, but it really works here. And while the script, by Schneider and Tom Brady, has more than its share of moronic moments, it's smart enough to include a first-rate comedic character I've never seen in films before – Schneider's African-American buddy (Guy Torry) who denounces everything as an act of reverse-racism ("Do you see why that waitress was so nice to me and served me first? Because I'm *black*."), and whose

potentially one-joke role gives the movie a keenly appropriate finale. All this, plus *Survivor* survivor Colleen Haskell showing unexpected sweetness, ease, and pluck as Schneider's girlfriend, and *The Animal* emerges as a surprisingly funny and appealing summertime entertainment. *Damn* it.