

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE GLASS HOUSE

The domestic thriller *The Glass House* is obvious and over-the-top from the word go, and that's what I liked about it. It takes true chutzpah to pull off a movie with visuals this baroque and plotting this convoluted; it might be the most trashily enjoyable work of its kind since 1997's *The Devil's Advocate*

. Like that Al Pacino craptacular,

The Glass House

has no higher agenda than showing audiences, in horror-flick form, the luridness behind ultra-rich "perfection," and it's so up-front about its limited ambitions, and so earnestly performed by its top-tier cast, that you can easily lean back and enjoy it for the stylish dreck it is. Is it a good movie? Nah. An entertaining one? Hell, yes.

After their parents are killed in an auto wreck, 16-year-old Ruby (Leelee Sobieski) and 11-year-old Rhett (Trevor Morgan) are taken in by their parents' friends, Terry and Erin Glass (Stellan Skarsgard and Diane Lane). The Glasses live in a huge Malibu home constructed primarily of glass – who woulda thunk it? – but when the kids are scuttled off to the tiny bedroom they have to *share*, Ruby begins sensing that something's amiss. Indeed. It turns out that the Glasses' interest in the kids is purely financial, which probably wouldn't be so unforgivable if Terry weren't also a sociopathic lech and Erin weren't a passive-aggressive morphine addict. And once Ruby gets a little too close to the truth about her new foster folks, Terry makes it quite clear that no one's going to mess with the Glasses' privileged lifestyle; he reminds her that he and his wife will still have access to the kids' money with only *one* living child.

The Glass House is one of those movies that wouldn't exist without the law of contrivances, which states that if you're conducting secretive business on the telephone in the middle of the night, the person from whom you're hiding said information will naturally walk by and eavesdrop on your call. Or if you complain to a social worker about the bedroom you share with your brother and about your dope-shooting foster mom, the day the social worker visits will just *happen*

to be the day you get your own room and New Mom cleans out her medicine cabinet. We're all used to these clichés in thrillers, but

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incorporates so many of them that it becomes rather dizzying. Scene by scene, the movie is almost dopey beyond measure, and I haven't even addressed some basic questions of plotting – like, how did the kids' parents ever become friends with these freaks in the first place? – that could drive you crazy if you thought about them at length.

Thankfully, director Daniel Sackheim doesn't give us much time to think. He's too busy enticing us with icy-cool visuals and sharp pacing, and guiding his performers to some surprisingly outstanding work. Leelee Sobieski brings terrific undercurrents of loneliness and resentment to her character – her remembrance of being orphaned lingers in every scene – and Diane Lane is marvelously textured; she's the movie's only real mystery, as we try to determine to what extent Erin is involved in the sinister goings-on. And while some might complain about the casting of Stellan Skarsgard – "No one in their right mind would entrust kids to *Stellan Skarsgard!* He's an oily bastard in every film he's in!" – I thought the choice was perfect. C'mon, it's a genre movie, we *know*

Terry's gonna be a nutcase, and Skarsgard plays the role with such thinly veiled malevolence that's he's a real kick; you don't know whether you want him to get caught or want to continue watching his nasty escapades. Against all logic,

The Glass House

stands as a true guilty pleasure; just

try

to recommend it to friends without a goofy, embarrassed grin on your face.



HARDBALL

We've all seen movies, *lots* of movies, where an inspirational coach or teacher turns a bunch of unformed, "loser" kids into winners, but in each of them we're at least privy to the *methods*

the coach or teacher uses to better the young charges, sound or unsound as they might be. (I will forever relish the sight of Michelle Pfeiffer's inner-city teacher in

Dangerous Minds

rewarding her students by hurling candy at them like it was treat time at Sea World.) In *Hardball*

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, a reprobate gambler (Keanu Reeves) is forced into coaching a Little League team on the south side of Chicago and turns his awkward young players into winners by ... well, I don't know. The movie forgets to show us. It's as if the filmmakers realized that we know

Hardball

's basic story so well by now that they can scrimp on things like motivation; it's a connect-the-dots screenplay.

So here's a taste of what you'll get: Reeves will initially hate his job, he'll strike up a romance with a pretty teacher (Diane Lane, as sweet here as she is salty in *The Glass House*), he'll come
this
close

to quitting before realizing he really loves those little kids, and he'll become a Better Person after tragedy strikes (at which point he actually says of one of the tykes, "He made me a better person."). So, yes, you've seen this movie before, but as acted by Reeves and directed by Brian Robbins, you've rarely seen it done so ineptly; if it weren't for the cheerfully profane performances from the pre-teens, who look like they're having a blast,

Hardball

would be totally worthless. Is a movie inspirational if it inspires you to throw something at the screen?



TWO CAN PLAY THAT GAME

By now, Vivica A. Fox certainly deserves a romantic comedy that's all her own, but she definitely deserves a better one than *Two Can Play That Game*. Playing Shante, an ad exec who knows the psychological games men play in relationships and is a master at making them play
her games, Fox is as devastatingly beautiful and confident as ever. The trouble is that Shante, and I'm putting this as delicately as possible, is a bitch, a woman who makes her long-suffering boyfriend (Morris Chestnut, whose usually indefatigable presence is too subdued here) jump through hoops just for the fun of it, and writer-director Mark Brown compounds the problem by having Shante speak frequently, and endlessly, to the camera, making us co-conspirators to her shenanigans; it's hard to root for her when we don't even

like

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her.

Two Can Play That Game

limps along from one predictable encounter to the next, and even the movie's talented ensemble (which includes Anthony Anderson, Mo'Nique, Tamala Jones, and Gabrielle Union) can't salvage their material. Don't blame Fox, though. She's got what it takes to be a big star in romantic comedies, as soon as someone creates a role, and a film, that's as appealing as she is.