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ZOOLANDER

Those of us who've been waiting, in film after film, for Ben Stiller to hit the comedic peaks he reached on his short-lived TV series *The Ben Stiller Show* might find *Zoolander* pretty irresistible.

When he starred in that 1992 sketch-com (which lasted all of thirteen episodes, co-starred the wildly talented Janeane Garofalo, Andy Dick, and Bob Oedenkirk, and managed to contain more laughs in a half-hour than a season's worth of *SNL*), he seemed an unstoppable comic powerhouse: a brilliant mimic who found a way to turn show-biz vanity and fatuousness inside out, making us roar with laughter at those we were meant to esteem. He was brazenly, subversively funny. Yet in his big movie roles – especially in hits like *There's Something About Mary* and *Meet the Parents* – he's been specializing in a mildness that borders on banality; his line readings are smart, but his characters seem neutered, as if Stiller were *apologizing* for being a movie star. His over-the-top comic bravura occasionally came through in *Mystery Men*, and everyone loves the scene in *Meet the Parents* where he threatens to kick De Niro's ass, but not until *Zoolander* has a movie allowed Stiller to really run wild; even though the film itself is spotty, Stiller's portrayal of the grandly stupid male model Derek Zoolander is wickedly inspired.

While many have been ragging on the film's plot, which deals with Zoolander being programmed to murder the President of Malaysia (don't even ask), no one appears to be commenting on how clever the movie's design is: *Zoolander* is simultaneously a Ben Stiller vanity project (he also directed and co-wrote the film) and a *parody* of a Ben Stiller vanity project. Many comics would have the audacity to play a homelessly dim Sexiest Man in the World, but the gag would be that only in the universe of

that movie
would anyone else ever buy it; imagine Mike Myers, David Spade, or Rob Schneider in the Zoolander role, and it becomes, at best, a one-joke affair. But Ben Stiller
is
a great-looking guy with an amazing physique – he's completely believable as a shallow male model – and so there's an added, exquisite layer of self-parody built into
Zoolander
. When Stiller sucks in his cheekbones and adopts a vaguely androgynous pout to approximate Zoolander's dangerous-yet-sexy air, he's not only satirizing the male-modeling industry (admittedly, an easy target) but celebrity itself, and
his
celebrity in particular. ("I'm a big-time movie star," he might be saying, "and I'm an egomaniacal dimwit.") Stiller isn't afraid to make himself look like a fool, and in scenes like the ones in which Zoolander scrunches his forehead and attempts to work out a piece of information that any second-grader could comprehend, he's peerless; Zoolander has room in his head for exactly one idea at a time. Ben Stiller ventures so deeply into this sketch-comedy character that, like Molly Shannon in
Superstar
, his performance has been ridiculously underrated; maybe audiences (and critics) don't like it when an actor comes too close to being legitimately,
frighteningly
dense.

The movie features a handful of scenes that could honestly be called classics: Zoolander's acceptance of the Best Male Model Award he didn't win; his attempts to bond with his coal-mining father and brother (adroitly played by Jon Voight and a wordless Vince Vaughn); his runway battle with the equally vain and almost-as-dumb model Hansel (Owen Wilson, equally committed and almost as funny as Stiller); a *2001: A Space Odyssey* parody that you can't *beli eve*
Stiller and Wilson pull off; and a pitch-perfect capper involving the world's most grotesquely inappropriate water fountain.
Zoolander
is a comedy in which the bits that don't work are mostly painless – they include a typically unfunny Will Ferrell turn and a drab role for Stiller's real-life wife, Christine Taylor – and the ones that do are sensational, and for those of us who've been Stiller fanatics since 1992, it shouldn't be missed.

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