

"Black Hawk Down" a Massive Misfire: Also, "Orange County"

Written by Mike Schulz

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BLACK HAWK DOWN

It has been widely reported that Ridley Scott's war drama *Black Hawk Down*, originally due later this year, had its release bumped up to qualify for year-end awards consideration and, in theory, serve as a balm for a country forever damaged by the tragic events of September 11. There's no reason to refute this, and there might even be a kind of self-serving nobility in Columbia Studios' decision, yet the film in question is a technically impressive atrocity, one that's perhaps even *more* heinous in light of last fall's terrorist attacks. Although based on true events and Mark Bowden's well-regarded book, *Black Hawk Down* is jingoistic, dramatically inert, and sometimes shockingly racist; expect nominations and awards to follow.

Scott's film gives an account of the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia, circa October 1993, in which an American attack on the country went terrifyingly, tragically wrong; through a combination of human error, misjudgment of Somali response, and simple bad luck, a supposedly "in and out" half-hour military operation resulted in the loss of more than 500 lives. Director Scott doesn't spare us the graphic carnage of the battle; once the invasion is underway, the film plays like a feature-length version of the opening D-Day attack in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, with bullets whizzing past your head and possible death coming from every conceivable direction. Scott and his technical team can't be faulted for their realistic presentation of the horrors of war, and for many, that will be enough to convince them that *Black Hawk Down* is a magnificent cinematic achievement. Yet the film's extended battle sequence has a two-pronged effect that its makers couldn't have intended: It makes the film a numbing experience – you become so used to the shootings and explosions and images of soldiers running through the mud that the film has no texture or variety – and it makes us connoisseurs of the movie's visuals; you begin watching every new helicopter disaster and squib shot with an "Ooo! Good one!" reaction, which should be the *least* desired effect from a supposed anti-war movie.

This any-response-is-a-good-response mentality is directly tied in to the movie's overt racism. While it might be asking too much for the film to delve into the whys and wherefores of

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Somalian activity and response during this period, Scott appears to have no qualms about turning the Somalis into faceless, brutal madmen: The Enemy, pure and simple. Scott stages a nightmarishly offensive scene of the Somalis torturing and killing a soldier, lurching at the camera as if to tear it apart, and while there can be little doubt that this was the point of view of the actual soldier murdered and dragged naked through the Somalian streets, without any understanding of the Somalian viewpoint they come across as nothing more than loathsome savages. In turn, audiences adopt a "kill the bastards" mentality (not unlike the one many in our country have recently adopted), and *Black Hawk Down* becomes as frighteningly one-note and politically ignorant as a Rambo movie.

The film makes a few lazy attempts at humanity in its opening 45 minutes, when we are introduced to the Americans going into war, but they've all been completely deprived of personality and fail to re-connect with us once they've marched into battle. While it's somewhat refreshing to see a war movie that doesn't break its characters down into The Tough One, The Sensitive One, The Stutterer, and all the other typical genre archetypes, the actors – who include Josh Hartnett, Ewan McGregor (stuck with a dopey running gag about making the perfect cup of coffee), Tom Sizemore, and Sam Shepard in Ed Harris-at-the-control-panel mode – fail to make any impression whatsoever. You're never more aware that *Black Hawk Down* is, in fact, a Jerry Bruckheimer production than when you're watching a set of interchangeable faces yelling variants on "Let's get the hell outta here!" while stuff blows up real good in the background; what's actually destroyed, apart from the sets, is any sense of complexity and moral ambivalence that this devastatingly sad true-life tale should detail.



ORANGE COUNTY

Orange County is exactly the type of new release you hope for during the January doldrums: pleasant, smartly paced, unpretentious, and clocking in at a little over 80 minutes. In director Jake Kasdan's film debut, a former surfer/slacker (Colin Hanks) yearns to be a great writer after reading a classic coming-of-age novel, and the movie showcases the comic agony he goes through trying to escape his dysfunctional family and friends en route to Stanford. The film arrives with built-in curiosity appeal based on its casting – Colin is the son of Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, and his leading lady is played by Schuyler Fisk, the daughter of Sissy Spacek – and the fact that the director is the son of *Big Chiller* Lawrence Kasdan; *Orange County*

could easily have been a worthless piece of Hollywood nepotism run amok. But the movie

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contains a surprising generosity of spirit and fondness for all of its characters – surprising because screenwriter Mike White's last work was the relentlessly icky indie oddball

Chuck & Buck

– and it zips along on pure charm, aided in no small part by the contributions of a tremendous supporting cast.

Colin's parents are portrayed by John Lithgow and Catherine O'Hara, who should begin pestering their agents immediately for the remake rights to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; Lithgow, with his haughty, self-righteous grandeur, and O'Hara, with her two-shots-of-tequila-too-many blowsiness, are a dream of a nightmare couple. Jack Black, momentarily freed from his

Shallow Hal

dullness, returns to full Jack Black-ness, loud and deranged and absolutely, hysterically fearless. And they're just the tip of

Orange County

's character-actor iceberg: Kevin Kline, Lily Tomlin, Harold Ramis, Chevy Chase, Ben Stiller, Jane Adams, Leslie Mann, Garry Marshall, Dana Ivey, and Monica Keena, the most inspired of the collegiate talents on TV's

Undeclared

, all make welcome appearances. (They might have signed on as a favor to Jake Kasdan's dad, or in the hopes of one day co-starring in one of his ensemble comedies, but their work here remains topnotch.) Colin Hanks might be slightly miscast in the lead – he's just right as a studious grind, but it's impossible to believe that this sweet-faced kid was once, as he tells us in narration, "only interested in getting high and getting laid" – yet he seems to already be developing a winning comic style, hyper-active yet earnest, and he shares a relaxed rapport with Ms. Fisk; it's too bad she has nothing to play besides Loyal Girlfriend, but she's a lovely screen presence with an ironic streak of incredulity.

Orange County

certainly isn't anything revolutionary or even memorable, but it's a perfectly acceptable time-waster that you don't feel like an ass for enjoying.