

Story Saves "The Count": "The Count of Monte Cristo," "Birthday Girl," and "Slackers"

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

The best reason to see the latest remake of *The Count of Monte Cristo* is the source material. You can easily shrug off the movie's unimaginative staging, corny laugh lines, and obtrusive score for the chance to enjoy an opulently designed adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' audience-grabbing tale; it's the sort of story that was once called "a ripping good yarn."

Sentenced to life in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmund Dantes (Jim Caviezel) spends years plotting revenge against Mondego (Guy Pearce), his pathologically jealous best friend who imprisoned Edmund and stole his fiancée, Mercedes (Dagmara Dominczyk). With the help of a fellow inmate, the wizened and decrepit Faria (Richard Harris), Edmund escapes, becomes unimaginably wealthy, and disguises himself as a mysterious count in order to fully destroy Mondego; readers (and film audiences) everywhere have been enthralled with *The Count of Monte Cristo*

because it's a highfalutin version of the Charles Atlas story, where the 98-pound weakling gets sand repeatedly kicked in his face and eventually comes back to kick the bully's ass.

It's a good thing that the Dumas story is as engaging as it is; otherwise, this lavish film version would be pretty blah. Though the movie is nowhere near as moribund as his last swashbuckler,

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1991's *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, director Kevin Reynolds still doesn't display any sort of adventurous spirit; the cleverness of *Cristo's* plotting sees him through, but his visual sense is rather mundane and his pacing listless – the best that can be said for his direction is that the film looks like an expensive, moderately classy TV movie. Jay Wolpert's screenplay retains most of the novel's intricacies but adds needlessly anachronistic dialogue and half-baked comic relief in the form of Edmund's loyal assistant (Luis Guzman, a welcome presence despite his unformed role). And while he eventually gets to show some polish while in his Count disguise, Jim Caviezel, who has already played The Wounded One too many times in his brief screen career, is mostly forgettable in the title role (though he's not as dull as the wooden Ms. Dominczyk, who comes across like Liv Tyler's petulant sister).

Little matter. The film might be a dumbed-down version of the Dumas classic, but it's still mostly entertaining, and a couple of performers add some much-needed wickedness. As the decidedly monstrous prison warden, the basso-voiced Michael Wincott delivers his lines with vulgar malevolence; he doesn't get as much screen time as you might want, but his every appearance lets you know that some really juicy bad times are in store. And Guy Pearce is an absolute hoot as the reptilian Mondego, whose drunken, vindictive shenanigans and self-aggrandizement are a thrill to watch. Ignoring his character's rotting teeth, Pearce is like a handsome version of one of Christopher Walken's or John Malkovich's menacingly fey villains, and he helps turn what could have been a just-barely-adequate *Count of Monte Cristo* into a truly respectable entertainment.



BIRTHDAY GIRL

Like Guy Pearce, Nicole Kidman is a great-looking performer who loves playing it nasty, and even if her latest movie weren't as enjoyable as it is, she'd be enough reason to see Jez Butterworth's offbeat, genre-defying *Birthday Girl*. Kidman plays a Russian mail-order bride who winds up in the home of a nebbishy, English bank teller (Ben Chaplin), and who causes serious trouble when two fearsome Russian "friends" (Vincent Cassel and Mathieu Kassovitz) pop by for a visit. The film's previews make *Birthday Girl* look like a standard thriller involving a putz who gets hoodwinked by a gorgeous femme fatale and

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lives to regret it, but in a rare instance in which the preview *doesn't*

give away the entire story, the movie proves to be much more unusual than that. Filled with snarky humor and several key plot twists, the movie is more akin to

Something Wild

and

Nurse Betty

than it is to

Fatal Attraction

, and if you're keeping track, it's goosed by Nicole Kidman's third sensational screen performance in less than 10 months.

Playing the film's damaged, secretive vixen, Kidman is terrific precisely because of how *not* showy her portrayal is. In general, it's a thrill to watch actors speak fluently in a foreign tongue, but Kidman does it so effortlessly here – a good third of her dialogue is in Russian – that it takes you somewhat aback. Kidman's lack of a distinct screen presence has always been her greatest asset in character parts; in

Birthday Girl

, she completely disappears into the role of the hot tamale with smudgy eye liner, and she's marvelously edgy and mysterious all throughout the film. She's also matched well with Chaplin, employing his hangdog quality to fine comic effect, and director Butterworth proves adept as mixing the naturalistic with the ludicrous. Running a brisk 90 minutes,

Birthday Girl

features a few too many plot holes and contrivances for it to succeed as anything other than an innocuous lark, but it's a surprisingly entertaining concoction, the rare cinematic work that's smarter than its publicity would suggest.



SLACKERS

After his achingly nerdy debut in 1998's *Rushmore*, I think even those of us who loved his work were a little afraid of what Jason Schwartzman would be like when let off Wes Anderson's leash; he is, after all, Nicolas Cage's cousin, and his mostly subdued portrayal was just gonzo enough to hint at major, frenzied subversion lying in wait. Well, "subversive" isn't exactly the

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term that comes to mind when seeing his work in the college comedy

Slackers

. "Repellant" and "asinine" seem fitting, though. Here, he plays another achingly nerdy student, but the junior blackmailer he plays in

Slackers

is, to put it mildly, wholly unfunny. Schwartzman pratfalls, works himself into apoplectic fits, performs grade-Z variants of Adam Sandler songs, and in one painful scene, fondles the bare breasts of septegenarian Mamie Van Doren; all in all, he might be the least amusing screen character Hollywood has offered since Jar Jar Binks (and at least Jar Jar didn't make you feel dirty for having watched him). Perhaps unsurprisingly, he's a perfectly emblematic figure for *Slackers*

, which manages to throw away whatever natural charm its cast exudes – the maligned parties include Devon Sawa, James King, Laura Prepon, and the amiably low-key Jason Segel – through an endless series of witless fart jokes, masturbation gags, and one scene after another that makes you want to hide your face in shame. At a late-night showing of the film this past weekend, I was astounded to hear the back-row yahoos release peals of "shocked," raucous laughter at every obvious joke, and the noise sounded eerily like the fall of Western civilization.