

Two Stupid Movies Don't Spell "Trouble": "High Crimes" and "Big Trouble"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 09 April 2002 18:00

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HIGH CRIMES

If Hollywood studios absolutely insist on feeding us one piece-of-crap potboiler after another, they could certainly do worse than the trashily entertaining military thriller *High Crimes*.

Ashley Judd plays Claire Kubik, a hotshot (read: soulless) attorney in San Francisco who is shocked to discover that her husband Tom (Jim Caviezel) has been covering up a past life as a special-forces Army officer, is living under an alias, and is now being accused of the murder of nine innocents during a coup in El Salvador. Knowing nothing of military-trial procedure, Claire enlists the help of Lieutenant Embry (Adam Scott), a baby-faced Army lawyer, and Charlie Grimes (Morgan Freeman), a recovering alcoholic with insight into the military's lurid underbelly, and together the trio tries to clear Tom's name before engendering violent retribution by certain Army officials. In short, *High Crimes* is kind of like *A Few Good Men* meets *Rules of Engagement* meets *Jagged Edge*

, and while that might sound heinous, the results are surprisingly enjoyable, as long as you don't spend too much time thinking about them.

Though his direction is crisp and able, Carl Franklin doesn't bring *High Crimes* much of the passion in his previous crime thrillers

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One False Move

and

Devil in a Blue Dress

, movies that had a lot more life. You get the feeling Franklin knows his material this time out is pretty run-of-the-mill; though the film does feature its share of surprises, each character's arc – Judd's transformation from clueless spouse to weathered avenger, Freeman's descent from on-the-wagon to staggering-drunk – is awfully predictable. So instead of spending too much time hooking us into

High Crimes

' storyline, he wisely chooses to focus primarily on the performers. Franklin was smart, for instance, in his casting of Jim Caviezel, an actor for whom suffering and misery come all too easily. His hangdog quality, combined with his movie-star handsomeness, makes Caviezel perfect casting as an accused dupe, yet his blankness, occasionally interrupted by a killer grin, hints that Tom might also be hiding more information than he's revealing and shouldn't be trusted too quickly; this might be his best screen work to date. In Morgan Freeman, Franklin has an actor of astonishing range and variety, one incapable of falseness; Freeman invests his clichéd, crusty-but-lovable boozehound with so much inner life that it becomes a classic supporting turn. Adam Scott, who could be Wes Bentley's twitchy twin, is enormous fun in what could have been a jokey role, and he's lucky to share numerous scenes with the beguiling Amanda Peet as Claire's sister, Jackie; Peet, whose exuberance has been wasted in every film *except The Whole Nine Yards*

, gives

High Crimes

the blowsy comic relief it needs.

These four performers would be worth watching in just about anything, which is good, because you're never quite sure how to take Ashley Judd in the lead. Late in the film, she has one scene that's very revealing: While telling off an Army general (the underused Bruce Davison), Claire hits such strident, holier-than-thou notes of self-satisfaction that you want to cringe; as in her other worthless thrillers, such as the execrable *Double Jeopardy*, Judd comes off merely as a bad TV actress delivering wretched dialogue. But after Davison's character leaves, Franklin gives us a shot of Claire reacting to her own diatribe, choking back tears of nervousness and rage, and Judd suddenly seems like a

marvelous

actress; her tough-gal demeanor was a front for the general, an act, and Claire herself realizes that her performance

barely

passed muster. Judd's work is like that throughout

High Crimes

. She vacillates between terrible and terrific, and in doing so, becomes emblematic for the film as a whole. It's an empty-headed, completely routine piece, but it's surprisingly gripping, and it gives its performers, the supporting ones in particular, the chance to really shine.

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BIG TROUBLE

The performers are also the central pleasure in Barry Sonnenfeld's *Big Trouble*, but that's not all that surprising, since there are about 20 of them in major roles. This adaptation of Dave Barry's first novel is so ridiculously overstuffed with characters and plotlines that, within its first 15 minutes, you can't imagine that the movie will find its center and conclude in a satisfying manner; it doesn't, but the film does feature enough fringe amusements to make it mildly diverting nonetheless. Even if I spent this week's entire article detailing what goes on and to whom in *Big Trouble*

, I probably wouldn't have space enough; suffice it to say this comedy deals with ad execs, thieves, rich WASPs, cops, FBI agents, sullen teenagers, and a guy named Puggy who eats Fritos and lives in a tree, and they all get involved in the hijacking of a nuclear device over Miami. (This last part, understandably, made *Big Trouble*

's studio nervous about releasing the film in light of the September 11 attacks – the film was scheduled to come out shortly thereafter – and you might find yourself wincing when the film's dimwitted crooks manage to sneak the explosive on a commercial jet.)

Considering that *Big Trouble* runs slightly under 90 minutes, this is far too much to pack into such a cramped time frame, and Sonnenfeld loses track of several of his characters; Tim Allen and Rene Russo are supposedly the romantic leads, but their roles are so unformed you forget they're even there. We're also subjected to far too much of Stanley Tucci's overbearing dyspepsia and Jason Lee's beatific Fritos-muncher, and the whole movie has an aesthetic ugliness that reeks of TV drama circa 1975; back when he was a cinematographer, Sonnenfeld shot such gorgeous films as the Coen brothers' *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing*

, so how can he now stand to helm a movie with such ungainly lighting and composition? Thankfully, though, *Big Trouble*

is so chock-full of dandy comics that the movie provides a fair degree of idiosyncratic enjoyment. Ben Foster and Zooey Deschanel come off best as teens whose mixture of blasé condescension and genuine wonder comment on everything that surrounds them, but the movie features several performers who nearly match them: Omar Epps and Dwight Myers (formerly Heavy D) are wonderful as unorthodox FBI agents; Tom Sizemore and

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Jackass

' Johnny Knoxville rival

Raising Arizona

's John Goodman and William McNamara as peerlessly brainless lowlifes; Janeane Garofalo and Patrick Warburton are beautifully matched as a good-cop/stupid-cop team; and Dennis Farina shows up in a take on his gangster from

Get Shorty

(which Sonnenfeld also directed) and, astonishingly, manages to convey his patented loathing of the entire human race without once saying "fuck."

Big Trouble

, like

High Crimes

, isn't worth much attention, but both films benefit from being extraordinarily well-cast in supporting roles; they're both proof that second bananas oftentimes deliver more sheer enjoyment than their top-billed co-stars.