

Young Actors Salvage "Murder": "Murder by Numbers" and "The Scorpion King"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 23 April 2002 18:00

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MURDER BY NUMBERS

In Barbet Schroeder's thriller *Murder by Numbers*, Sandra Bullock stars as Cassie Mayweather, a Southern California detective who, along with her nebbishy partner (Ben Chaplin), attempts to solve the murder of a local Jane Doe, killed in a seemingly haphazard fashion and left beside a creek.

All clues point to a drug-dealing high-school janitor (Chris Penn), yet during the course of routine interviews, Cassie begins to wonder about teenagers Richard (Ryan Gosling), an overly confident child of privilege, and Justin (Michael Pitt), a bookish nerd, who claim not to be friends yet are mysteriously linked to one another. Could these two ordinary youths, for reasons unknown, have masterminded this seemingly random murder? The audience knows what Cassie doesn't: Yes, they have, and they might not be done killing yet.

By all rights, *Murder by Numbers* should be crap, even with the gifted Schroeder (*Reversal of Fortune*, *Sing*, *le White Female*

) helming. Its main storyline is plodding and ungainly, it features one of those asinine endings in which a character, literally, is found dangling over a cliff, and most annoyingly of all (at least for some of us), it has the unmistakable air of a Sandra Bullock Showcase. By this I mean that the

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lead character (a) is a beautiful woman who doesn't realize it, (b) is a great deal smarter than the "superiors" who talk down to her, (c) can't see that the guy she (secretly) loves actually loves her back, (d) is afraid of commitment and happiness but will learn to change, (e) will find hidden strength by Facing Her Fears, and (f) will walk into the sunset with a new beau, greater respect in the workplace, and a feeling of self-entitlement she's never had before. You go, girl! Lord knows she plays this archetype well, just as Ben Chaplin always plays puppy-eyed-simp-bamboozled-by-powerful-female well, but the only time

Murder by Numbers

shakes off the formulaic doldrums is when it focuses on Gosling and Pitt, and when it does, the film borders on the extraordinary. These two are so good, in fact, and their roles have been shaped so sharply by screenwriter Tony Gayton, that the film might suffer a box-office downfall because of them; the audiences that usually flock to Sandra Bullock vehicles might easily find them too creepy for comfort.

Obviously modeled on the notorious real-life killers Leopold and Loeb, Richard and Justin share a dead-eyed calm and a contempt for bourgeois complacency in the guise of suburban "comfort"; they plan and carry out a murder because at least it's *something* to do. (Instead of being bothersome, their lack of motive makes them all the more terrifying.) Yet the movie makes it implicitly clear that their partnership, and the subsequent murder, is about far more than just seeing if they can get away with it. There's a taunting, erotically charged air of menace lurking under Richard's and Justin's scenes. Though it's never overtly stated and only subtly visualized, the boys' sexual relationship is shockingly palpable for a mainstream Hollywood release; their inflections and body language show that their mutual attraction has been built on constant oneupmanship and the fear of backing down in front of the other, and these teenage assassins give

Numbers

*Murder by
the*

jolt of messy realism the film desperately needs.

Ryan Gosling and Michael Pitt play their roles to perfection, and Gosling, in particular, gives one of the riskiest, most charismatic teen portrayals I've seen in years. (He's also receiving raves for playing a neo-Nazi in the Sundance smash *The Believer*.) His Richard is savage and terrifying, yet also confused and damn near tender, and Gosling pulls off these diametrical traits with astonishing ease; bank on him enjoying a huge career. Pitt, who was the young heartbreaker in the marvelous

Inch

Hedwig & the Angry

, has the less flashy character but plays Justin with a morbid insouciance that's positively transfixing. When the two are onscreen together,

Murder by Numbers

seems not just a routine genre piece but a captivating, first-rate thriller, and Barbet Schroeder, whose direction of most of the film's investigative scenes is perfunctory at best, proves a spellbinding chronicler of teenage angst leading to possible madness. At its best,

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makes you forget that you're watching a Sandra Bullock production (and I mean that literally; Bullock served, as she did on such vehicles as

28 Days

and

Miss Congeniality

, as an executive producer). I suppose, though, that I should be more fair to Ms. Bullock. She was obviously aware of what Schroeder, Gosling, and Pitt were doing with her film's teenage villains and smart enough to let the movie run with these unforgettable characters; hopefully, she can soon find a way to shake up her

own

image as daringly.



THE SCORPION KING

Every time I go to see a popcorn extravaganza such as *The Scorpion King*, I feel a twinge of dread, because I know I'll end up writing a review of it, and more often than not, I'll have to explain, yet again, why a movie that aims to be nothing more than a diverting little trifle gave me no pleasure whatsoever. Occasionally I'm surprised. Last year's

The Mummy Returns

was stupid and mostly incoherent – \$200 million worth of ticket-buyers saw it, but does *anyone*

remember the plot? – yet fast-paced and filled with charm, especially in the gleeful performances of Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz; I rather liked it. Director Chuck Russell's

The Scorpion King

, which is positioned as a prequel, of sorts, to

The Mummy

movies, is also agreeably inconsequential, but charm it does not have. No doubt this will depend on your feelings for wrestler-cum-movie-star The Rock, whose villainous character from

The Mummy Returns

is recast as the good guy here. I have friends, women mostly, who absolutely adore this monolith, and as

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gives audiences more than enough time to ogle his physique and piercing gaze, many might be

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more than happy to watch him romance the ladies, engage in "funny" banter with his dimwitted sidekick (Grant Heslov, who showed enormous promise in 1994's

True Lies

and has been misused ever since), and kick bad-guy ass for 90 minutes. For those of us who question The Rock's cinematic abilities, though – his flat line delivery, his unease with fellow performers, the way he faces every obstacle like ... well, like a once-bested wrestler who now has Something to Prove –

The Scorpion King

can seem like a really

long

ninety minutes with precious little entertainment. (Matters aren't helped, of course, by the film's crummy special effects, witless dialogue, and inane plotting, but these elements are practically *de rigueur*

in a movie like this.) So, fans of The Rock, by all means go, enjoy, and wake the rest of us when it's over.