

"Mr. Deeds" Is Worst of a Bad Crop: Also, "Lilo & Stitch" and "Juwanna Mann"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 02 July 2002 18:00

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MR. DEEDS

I'd love to reveal the finale to the new Adam Sandler comedy *Mr. Deeds*, but that would imply that I made it through the picture. For the first time in almost 10 years, I walked out of a movie – at roughly the one-hour mark – and am a little mortified that I lasted as long as I did.

I've sat through entire films that were possibly even worse – just this year, *Slackers*, *Dragonfly*, and the Jennifer Lopez laugh-fest

Enough

spring to mind – but all of them had a sort of hypnotic badness; even though you weren't being remotely entertained, you could watch them with a grin, amazed that such half-assed work could actually reach the screen. There's nothing hypnotic, or even surprising, about

Mr. Deeds

' awfulness. But the contempt that Sandler, director Steven Brill, and screenwriter Tim Herlihy have for their audience is appalling, and I'm talking about

Sandler's

audience here, not those of us who would be quite content never to watch him in anything ever again.

Mr. Deeds

feels like a deliberate nose-thumbing at that ever-decreasing legion of Sandler sycophants who genuflect merely for his showing up, and the saddest thing is that this audience probably won't even realize how badly they're being insulted. I felt embarrassed to be in the theater, and I

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bolted.

In theory, there's nothing that wrong with remaking Frank Capra's schmaltzy, 1936 feature *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*

, in which a well-meaning rube inherits a gazillion dollars and tries to make the world a better place, all the while suffering the consternation of the stuffed shirts around him. And even with all the faults typical to an Adam Sandler vehicle – stale jokes, predictable physical “comedy,” dreadful staging, an excruciating score, the humiliating waste of supporting talent (Winona Ryder, John Turturro, Peter Gallagher, Conchata Ferrell) –

Mr. Deeds

shouldn't have come off any worse than, say,

Big Daddy

or

Little Nicky

. Yet, for me, two elements raised – lowered? – this work to the level of unendurable. First, there's the product placement. The film's brand names could legitimately be billed as supporting characters. There's a sequence in

Mr. Deeds

so jaw-dropping it must almost be seen to be believed, in which Sandler introduces some white-collar types to the joys of Wendy's fast food and, honest to God, the dialogue unfolds thusly: “I just love the Big Bacon Classic. ... How's that Frosty treatin' ya? ... I'm so glad I got the Biggie fries” Had this scene been directed as a

parody

of product placement, as in

Wayne's World

, it might have had some point. But that level of subtlety is surely beyond Steven Brill's abilities, and the scene has no punchline; it's a commercial, pure and simple, which Sandler and company must assume their audience is too witless to realize.

What's finally most insufferable about *Mr. Deeds*, though, is the film's nonstop congratulating of Deeds, and Sandler, for absolutely anything he does. While it's far too late in Sandler's career for him to still be playing a virgin bumpkin from the sticks, a big deal is made about Deeds's sweetness (which Sandler plays as a form of retardation), his refusal to curse in front of a lady, his essential decency. And we're meant to cheer these qualities. Yet Sandler can't risk losing his frat-boy fan-base, so Deeds is also prone to punching rude characters in the face, knocking them on their backs, and getting roaringly drunk with the likes of John McEnroe (which he lamely apologizes for in a subsequent scene). Deeds himself is just a compendium of Sandler's usual tics; he could be saying to the audience, “This character makes no sense, but it doesn't matter, because you're gonna love me no matter what I do.” I finally exited the cineplex after a nauseating, soft-focus scene in which Deeds e-mails a friend back home, discussing his loneliness while violins play on the soundtrack – it wasn't this scene that bothered me so much as the fact that it directly followed a sequence of Deeds hurling cats out of a burning building

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and then breaking his own fall by landing on a fat woman. Nobody who gets suckered into seeing *Mr. Deeds* should be ashamed to leave before its conclusion; it's the ones who happily *stay* that I'd worry about.



LILO & STITCH

Watching *Lilo & Stitch* is like being trapped in a playroom with two hyperactive kids deprived of their Ritalin. I guess that's some people's idea of family entertainment. Disney's tale of a loathsome, pathologically violent little alien who winds up in the questionable care of a maladjusted Hawaiian girl is brightly animated and makes fine use of numerous Elvis Presley tunes. Yet at the screening I attended the young audience was noisier and more restless than usual -- not, I'm guessing, because the movie was a drag, but because it seemed to indicate that a zero-attention-span was a *good* thing. Lilo, the girl, and Stitch, the alien, run amok, break things, cause general mayhem, and then weep when it's recommended, quite rightly, that they separate; the moral that Troubled Kids Need Love Too would carry more weight if the film didn't get off on their behavior, trying to score laughs with every bash, smash, and crash. You feel no connection to either lead character, so the forced *E.T.*

-ness of their friendship feels phony from minute one, and the film's senseless, anything-for-an-effect plotting does nothing to aid matters.

Lilo & Stitch

almost seems to

inspire

reckless behavior, and heaven knows we don't need more of that in children's entertainment.

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