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## XXX

Put simply, Vin Diesel's action thriller *XXX*, directed by *The Fast and the Furious* helmer, Rob Cohen, succeeds competently at its intentions, which are to make a loud, ass-kicking, summertime blockbuster and kickstart a new, James-Bond-playing-extreme-sports movie franchise.

It's just that there's no way I could possibly care *less* about those intentions. And before my friends needle me yet again for refusing to have fun at what is obviously meant to be nothing more than quick-paced popcorn entertainment, let me remind them that, this summer alone, I've truly enjoyed

*Spider-Man, The Sum of All*

*Fears*

, *The*

*Bourne Identity*

, and

*Reign of Fire*

, not to mention the exciting-

*and*

-complex

*Minority Report*

and numerous sequences in

*Attack of the Clones*

. However, it's impossible to connect to any movie, even an action bonbon like

*XXX*

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, in which even the characters onscreen aren't connecting with it. Diesel might be getting a lot of press, and even more fans, with his "Who gives a crap?" implacability, but this attitude serves only to point out that a movie such as

*XXX*

is nothing but the sum of its action scenes; there's no texture or surprise, and without them, there are also no real thrills. The film's stunts are certainly well-done, but I missed the gritty, vibrant intensity Cohen brought to

*Furious*

, and the film's best moments, like its spectacular avalanche run, have all been given away in the trailers.

*XXX*

is pro-forma, dispensable Hollywood trash with a budget. It's merely Product. Take it as you will.



### ***BLOOD WORK***

After the high-octane shenanigans of *XXX*, a slow-paced, deliberate crime thriller by Clint Eastwood would seem to be the perfect antidote, yet his most recent work,

*Blood Work*

, goes too far in this direction; can anyone remember the last time an Eastwood movie was genuinely

*enjoyable*

? The storyline involves one of Eastwood's stalwart themes – the uneasy, and definitely unhealthy, doppelganger-ish connection between a cop and the serial killer he's tracking – but, as opposed to

*Tightrope*

or

*In the Line of Fire*

, the movie is dreary and uninvolving from the start. (Come to think of it, Clint's last enjoyable movie probably

*was*

1993's

*In the Line of Fire*

.) As in his most recent works in this genre, 1999's

*True Crime*

and 1997's

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*Absolute Power*

, Eastwood-as-director takes the thrill out of thrills; the pacing is logy, the expository scenes are endless, and as the film limps to its conclusion, any semi-cognizant viewer will have figured out whodunnit long before Eastwood does. As ever, our squinty hero deserves accolades for not hiding his age onscreen; his character in

*Blood Work*

is the recent recipient of a heart transplant, and his doctor (Anjelica Huston, a pleasure even in this undernourished role) continually reminds him that he's, you know, not the strapping young man he once was. It's always wonderful seeing a senior citizen in a leading role in film, particularly in a genre thriller, and Eastwood is certainly some kind of national treasure, yet it's hard to deny that you exit

*Blood Work*

knowing he's done it all before, and done it far better.



**MARTIN LAWRENCE LIVE: RUNTEL DAT**

Yearning for an audience's love and acceptance is, of course, part of a stand-up comedian's subtext, but I don't think I've ever seen this need demonstrated so brazenly as in the concert film *Martin Lawrence Live: Runteldat*. Lawrence opens by railing against critics and the media, who, he says, have been deliberately misrepresenting his offscreen antics – his drug-induced, screaming-amidst-traffic-while-carrying-a-gun episode, his nightclub brawls, his lapsing into a coma following a summertime jog – over the past decade;

*Runteldat*

, he promises, will give audiences the "true story" behind these events. And after roughly an hour of lame, uninspired material that has nothing to do with his real-life travails, Lawrence finally gets around to doing so. The trouble is, his "true story" doesn't sound in any way different from how it was presented in the media. Lawrence was high, as he cheerfully admits, made some stupid choices, and that's that. In Lawrence's view, though, his bad-boy rep is all the

*media's*

fault, because they

*told*

us these tales; "everyone has problems" is his mantra all throughout

*Runteldat*

, and it's only because he's famous that the media chose to single him out. Well,

*of course*

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that's why these stories were reported. Doesn't that go without saying? Without any kind of fresh perspective on the events in his life, Lawrence seems merely petulant, and his constant goosing of the audience for applause gets on your nerves; he shamelessly trots out the September 11 tragedy and goes for obvious "women are amazing for giving birth" cheers before launching into a bit about how revolting the process is. Lawrence, in stand-up mode, is occasionally amusing when he gets a rhythm going, as in his monologue involving a man slowly getting insanely drunk. Yet

*Runteldat*

is little more than a 100-minute plea for audience approval; Lawrence's desire for understanding might be touching if it didn't also feel incredibly bogus.



### ***SPY KIDS 2: THE ISLAND OF LOST DREAMS***

The original *Spy Kids*, with its intentionally cheesy effects and hyperkinetic pacing, was essentially videogame mayhem for the pre-teen set, but it was harmless, and due in large part to the performances of young Alexa Vega and Daryl Sabara, it had charm. Its follow-up, *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams*

, is much like its predecessor, but without the charm. In this installment, Varga and Sabara must again save the planet, this time by traveling to a remote island inhabited by a Dr. Moreau-ish scientist (Steve Buscemi) and his group of genetically altered animals. The film features some incredibly clever touches, most of them arising from this group of mutant hybrids – we're treated to literal interpretations of a "bull-frog," a "spider-monkey," and the like – but there's also a witty homage to Ray Harryhausen and

*Jason & The Argonauts*

when the kids do battle with some animated skeletons, and the movie opens terrifically, with a glimpse at some ultra-high-speed amusement-park rides, including one called The Vomiter, which the youths onscreen

*still*

yawn at. The film, though, feels far clunkier than last year's entry, mostly because it no longer has the original's comic notion that the kids were learning their spy skills as they went along; Varga and Sabara are now stuck playing "real" spies (the film often resembles

*Bugsy Malone*

in James Bond drag), and they're nowhere near as entertaining this way. Robert Rodriguez's sequel, despite being moderately amusing, feels patched-together and sketchy, and even though the cast includes Antonio Banderas and Carla Gugino (again playing the kids' parents),

## A Late-Summer Bumper Crop of Crap: "XXX," "Blood Work," "Martin Lawrence's Runteldat," and "Spy Kids"

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Buscemi, Bill Paxton, Alan Cumming, Tony Shalhoub, Holland Taylor, and Ricardo Montalban, it's amazing how little they help. Your kids might enjoy it, but it's doubtful they'll be clamoring for

*Spy Kids 3*

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