

How I Spent My 2002 Summer Vacation – in Two-Hour Chunks

Written by Mike Schulz

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ABOUT A BOY – As bland and forgettable as its title. Paul and Chris Weitz's mostly lifeless work begins well, but you can feel the sickly sentimentality creeping up on you, and you just know you're going to have to endure a series of Life Lessons and the grueling prospect of watching Hugh Grant – an enjoyably pathetic sloth – better himself as a human being. Like all sitcoms posing as movies, everything rough-edged is ignored to ensure Happy Endings for all.

AUSTIN POWERS IN GOLDMEMBER – The pre-credits cameos are just about worth the price of admission; afterwards, as you'd imagine, the film has nowhere to go but downhill. The series still gets mileage out of its silhouetted gags and the irrepressible Dr. Evil, but even with the occasional riotous moment, Mike Myers' franchise might finally be running out of steam;
Goldmember

often feels like a prolonged, obnoxious in-joke without a punchline. A lazy and slack piece of work, it provides exactly what you'd expect ... and less.

BLOOD WORK – Ever since 1993's *In the Line of Fire* we've awaited a Clint Eastwood vehicle that was actually *fun*. The wait continues. Dreary and uninvolved from the start, the pacing is logy, the expository scenes are endless, and as this murder mystery limps to its conclusion, any semi-cognizant viewer will have figured out whodunit long before Eastwood's cop does. As ever, our squinty hero deserves accolades for not hiding his age onscreen, but scene for scene,
Blood Work

is far too reminiscent of better Eastwood works.

THE BOURNE IDENTITY – Pretty damned enjoyable, even if you have a low threshold for international spy thrillers. Though the movie lacks the triumphant, low-down funk of director Doug Liman's *Swingers* or *Go*, it's a fine piece of Hollywood craftsmanship; Liman has an unerring sense of pacing and, when the script allows it, really knows how to set up a joke. Matt Damon, in his first Action Stud role, brings the film welcome gravitas, and co-star Franka Potente is marvelously vivid. Popcorn entertainment that transcends the juvenile.

THE CROCODILE HUNTER: COLLISION COURSE – The movie proper – involving CIA agents, gun-toting Aussies, and the like – is mostly inept. Yet the scenes of babbling, chipper

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Steve Irwin wrangling some of nature's "beautiful creatures" bring to the theatre something largely missing from recent family entertainment: wonder.

Crocodile Hunter

is barely a movie, yet whenever it focuses on Steve introducing us to the perils of nature, it's pretty terrific entertainment.

DEUCES WILD – Shallow, uninspired, and faintly ridiculous pap about '50s-era greasers. The film's derivative and retrograde script has been gussied up with show-offy "cutting edge" visual design by director Scott Kalvert; the whole thing would be unbearable if it weren't for the earnest contributions of the cast, which includes Stephen Dorff, Brad Renfro, Fairuza Balk, James Franco, Balthazar Getty, and Drea de Matteo. Now on video and DVD, where you can safely avoid it there, too.

DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA-YA SISTERHOOD – Thoroughly obnoxious. Not one recognizably human emotion or event is on display in over two hours of screen time, and whatever enjoyment you might get out of individual line readings (particularly those of Maggie Smith and Fionnula Flanagan) is trashed by the film's sickening cutesiness and astonishing lapses in tone and plotting. With Sandra Bullock, Ellen Burstyn, Ashley Judd, and James Garner – it's hard to recall when they've ever been worse.

EIGHT LEGGED FREAKS – Despite a great title and a storyline that's reminiscent of the beloved *Tremors*, pretty much a bummer. After about 20 minutes, the jokiness becomes oppressive – the camp level is pushed too far and it goes from cleverly dopey to just plain unfunny – and director Ellory Elkayem's inept staging and editing makes you realize the film isn't a send-up of bad movies so much as it is just a *bad movie*

. David Arquette, Kari Wuhrer and Scarlett Johansson manage to keep admirably straight faces.

ENOUGH – Michael Apted's revenge melodrama provides some big laughs, but considering that the film's nominal subject is spousal abuse, they probably aren't intentional ones. Written and directed with all the quasi-earnestness of a Lifetime potboiler, *Enough* features one jaw-droppingly ridiculous moment after another even *before*

Jennifer Lopez turns into Zhang Ziyi in record time; her Dirty Harriet might inspire teenage girls everywhere to seek out abusive husbands of their own.

HALLOWEEN: RESURRECTION – Awful in all the expected ways, but who knew the filmmakers would be so stupid as to dispose of Jamie Lee Curtis in the first 15 minutes? Full of terrible acting, witless characters, groan-inducing dialogue, and Rick Rosenthal's obvious staging, *Resurrection* doesn't provide even one good scare, and manages to destroy whatever goodwill might have been left over from 1998's not-bad *Halloween:H20*

HOLLYWOOD ENDING – As a psychosomatically blind film director, Woody Allen gives a

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performance of such one-note obviousness that he single-handedly wrecks the movie. Not that his writing or direction is much better. With the constant cribbing from his other works, the laziness of his plotting, and the overall lethargy of the presentation, this easily stands as one of Woody's poorer outings; a day after seeing it, you're hard-pressed to remember even one funny line of dialogue. Tea Leoni, at least, provides some welcome dry wit.

INSOMNIA – A moody, atmospheric thriller with a magnificent locale. Given its Alaskan setting, the film has an almost unearthly beauty that clashes marvelously with the seediness of its story, and you can feel director Christopher Nolan's joy at shooting standard thriller scenes in unfamiliar territory. Unlike Nolan's *Memento*, *Insomnia* leaves no residue – in the end, it's just a fine genre exercise – but it has some beautifully staged sequences, and Al Pacino and Robin Williams reign in their more bombastic impulses.

JUWANNA MANN – Only the energetic antics of the wonderful cast keep this *Some Like It Hot* rip-off from being god-awful. There's not a joke you can't see coming and none of them is as funny as the movie seems to think, but lead Miguel A. Nunez Jr. gives surprisingly quirky line-readings, and the supporting ensemble, which features Vivica A. Fox, Kevin Pollak, Jenifer Lewis, and Tommy Davidson, keeps you smiling even while you're moaning at the movie's unending stupidity.

K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER – A strong, serio-tragic, and surprisingly emotional piece of work. Director Kathryn Bigelow gives the film a professional sheen and marvelous look, and has a trick up her sleeve; what begins as standard, though technically accomplished, action fare soon becomes a truly resonant examination of courage and fear amidst unspeakable danger. Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson are well-matched as warring sub commanders, and the film gets better and better as it progresses. Ignore the accents and enjoy the movie.

LILLO & STITCH – Viewing Disney's animated flick is like being trapped in a playroom with two hyperactive kids deprived of their Ridilin, which must be some people's idea of family entertainment. Though brightly animated, the film seems to indicate that a zero-attention-span is a *good* thing; the senseless, anything-for-an-effect plotting practically inspires reckless behavior and makes the forced *E.T.*-ness of the leads' friendship feel incredibly phony. Even the employment of numerous Elvis Presley tunes does little to help matters.

MARTIN LAWRENCE LIVE: RUNTELDTAT – After roughly an hour of lame, uninspired stand-up material, Lawrence finally gets around to detailing the "true stories" of his personal setbacks, and they turn out to be ... exactly the same stories divulged by Lawrence's avowed nemesis: The Media. A 100-minute plea for audience approval, *Runteldat* doesn't give any fresh perspective on what it's like to be in Lawrence's skin; his desire for understanding might be touching if it didn't feel incredibly bogus.

THE MASTER OF DISGUISE – Staggeringly unfunny. Working with wretched material, Dana Carvey – playing *Pistachio Disguisey* – proves that even his finest shtick is incapable of surprising us anymore (which might be why this amateurish

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production is being marketed solely to kids). By the time he trots out his George Bush impersonation for what must be the zillionth time, you don't just feel embarrassed for him; you wonder why you ever found him amusing in the first place.

MEN IN BLACK II – Stale popcorn. What should have been the very definition of lightweight summertime entertainment suffers from a shocking lack of inspiration and is redundant as hell. It supplies exactly what the original did minus the originality; unfortunately, that originality was about the only thing that made the 1997 film memorable. (As the film's big box-office attests, If You Clone It, They Will Come.) If it weren't for the yipping canine singing along to "Who Let the Dogs Out?", you wouldn't remember a moment of the movie 10 minutes after viewing it.

MINORITY REPORT – A juicy, wonderfully enjoyable 90-minute genre flick ... stretched out to 140 minutes. The film's art direction, effects, and composition rival anything director Steven Spielberg, or anyone else, has previously attempted; the movie's visual imagination is jaw-droppingly fine, and is nearly equaled by Tom Cruise's smashing performance. No one is liable to leave the movie disappointed, unless you agree it could wrap up a hell of a lot sooner than it does; in the wake of *A.I.*, the ghost of Stanley Kubrick appears to be haunting Spielberg still.

MR. DEEDS – An Adam Sandler vehicle featuring typically stale jokes, predictable physical "comedy," dreadful staging by Steven Brill, an excruciating score, the humiliating waste of supporting talent – I'd continue the endless list, but as I only made it through two-thirds of the picture, two-thirds of a summary will have to do.

MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING – A minor miracle: A thoroughly endearing indie comedy that, due to great marketing and stunning word-of-mouth, has outlasted all of the summer's blockbuster behemoths. The film's Greek family might be comprised of outsized caricatures, but Nia Vardalos and John Corbett are a dream of a romantic pairing; both underplay deftly while still earning laughs and "Awww"s in their every scene. A lightweight, wispy thing, and for sheer charm and sweetness, the romantic comedy of the year.

REIGN OF FIRE – Perhaps the summer's most surprising entertainment. This slightly futuristic dragons-on-the-loose flick has a seductive, menacing look and a grungy, graphic-novel atmosphere, which makes its frequent bursts of humor all the more surprising and welcome. Director Rob Bowman walks a fine line between the inane and the legitimately thrilling, and Matthew McConaughey and Christian Bale give enjoyably robust performances. The film invites you to either giggle or shudder; you'll find yourself doing quite a bit of both.

THE ROAD TO PERDITION – Visually astonishing, but mostly lifeless. Sam Mendes' experiment in florid stylization gives its characters no room to breathe; everyone involved, including peerless cinematographer Conrad L. Hall, has worked so hard at creating Art that they neglected to make the film emotionally engaging. Several moments of impending violence are minor classics, but the film's self-consciousness makes it impossible to connect with, and Tom Hanks' and Paul Newman's archetypal characters give them little to work with. Jude Law, at least, comes through with a crackling, frighteningly enjoyable portrayal.

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SCOOPY-DOO – Slightly above *Josie & The Pussycats* in terms of quality, thanks mostly to Matthew Lillard's dead-on Shaggy impersonation and Rowan Atkinson's indefatigable cleverness. But overall, a disaster. The film is witless, unfunny, and unable to decide if it's a film for tots or a parody of films for tots; it doesn't even get the joke of having Freddie Prinze Jr. play the personality-free Fred; Prinze is the one young actor in Hollywood with even less personality than Fred.

SIGNS – M. Night Shyamalan might be, as a recent *Newsweek* cover proclaimed, "the next Spielberg," but he's kind of like the Spielberg of

Hook

or

The Lost World: Jurassic Park

– he goes for broad, ham-fisted jokes amongst the thrills, his characters are cartoons, his dialogue is stilted and affected, and he signals his Plot Points with utter obviousness. Though his directorial prowess is oftentimes evident – his scenes of characters

approaching

things couldn't be bettered –

Signs

is strained, and the film becomes ridiculous at the exact moment it should be terrifying. Mel Gibson stars, and is oddly mannered throughout.

SPIDER-MAN – A zippy, entertaining spectacle. Despite being saddled with David Koepp's typically clunky dialogue, director Sam Raimi gives the movie enough visual life to easily make up for the screenplay's lack of dimension; the film's effects, gloriously unrealistic, have all the giddy, comic-book explosiveness you could hope for. Tobey Maguire nails Peter Parker's insecurity and gradually awakening sense of duty, and has chemistry to spare with Kirsten Dunst, so ebullient and charming that she practically walks off with the picture.

SPIRIT: STALLION OF THE CIMARRON – For stretches, Dreamworks' animated horse opera has some of the poetic resonance of Carroll Ballard's

The Black Stallion

, and had the filmmakers maintained this level of beguiling simplicity,

Spirit

could have emerged as a new classic. But Matt Damon's voice-over narration is needless and annoying, and Bryan Adams' power ballads and soft-rock numbers make you cringe every time they pop on the soundtrack, which happens a

lot

. Despite its vibrant 2-D animation, the film just misses being terrific.

SPY KIDS 2: THE ISLAND OF LOST DREAMS – Much like its predecessor, but without the charm. There are smashingly clever touches – a witty homage to Ray Harryhausen's animation, a hyperkinetic theme park – throughout, but without the original's comic notion of the youths gradually learning their spy skills, the film, for all its frenetic pacing, feels like a yawn. (It often resembles *Bugsy Malone* in James Bond drag.) Robert Rodriguez's direction is atypically clunky; the whole enterprise feels

patched-together and sketchy, and it wastes a great cast.

STAR WARS: ATTACK OF THE CLONES – There are sequences in this fifth installment as unapologetically enjoyable as any I've seen all year, and the movie is *still*

only borderline good. For every scene that makes you want to applaud – the opening airborne chase, the

Gladiator

-esque coliseum battle, Yoda giving Christopher Lee that I'm-gonna-kick-your-sorry-ass look – you'll have to sit through two featuring Hayden Christiansen and Natalie Portman's romantic drivel, and George Lucas' direction is moribund in material that begs for poetry. Still better than *The Phantom Menace*, though.

STUART LITTLE 2 – Without question, the most purely charming movie in current release. This sequel reprises everything that was enjoyable about the 1999 film – the dexterous animation, the splendid voice-over work (especially by Michael J. Fox, Melanie Griffith, James Woods, and Nathan Lane) – and adds a surprising poignancy; the film's themes on friendship and diversity are sweet without being mawkish. Add to this some clever one-liners and great cliffhanger sequences and you get a follow-up that, in its own pint-sized way, is just about perfect.

THE SUM OF ALL FEARS – If you can get past Ben Affleck playing Jack Ryan, you should have a fine time at this enjoyable piece of Cold War hogwash. That's a big "if," though; Affleck doesn't pull off his Brilliant Tough Guy act and inspires some inappropriate giggles. Thankfully, Morgan Freeman is on-hand, and director Phil Alden Robinson – of *Field of Dreams*

! – shows an unanticipated talent for escalating tension. You might not believe a minute of the film, but it's gripping and surprisingly quick-witted.

UNDERCOVER BROTHER – *Austin Powers* for the blaxploitation genre, and surprisingly not-terrible. While director Malcolm D. Lee's pacing is off – like he's waiting for laughs from a nonexistent studio audience – the film remains genial, and occasionally inspired. Unfortunately, most of the performers have exactly one joke to deliver and deliver it repeatedly over the course of 90 minutes; Eddie Griffin is likable in the lead, though, and Neil Patrick Harris has a scene of comic ultraviolence you might never forget.

UNFAITHFUL – Among its many virtues, Adrian Lyne's hypnotic thriller gives the riveting Diane Lane the chance to give a true Star Performance; her guilt-ridden, cheating housewife is a triumphant creation. The spare, lucid script digs deeper into the hidden ugliness behind a seemingly happy marriage than *In the Bedroom* did, and Lyne's staging of the film's mounting fear and uncertainty is electrifying. With Richard Gere, doing some of the strongest acting of his career, and an emotionally overwhelming, superbly open-ended finale.

WINDTALKERS – A World War II drama that never comes close to reaching the greatness of its themes. Surprisingly, director John Woo has made his first unapologetically *earnest*

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movie, but it's not a good one; the film is shallow and tiring, and the screenplay wallows in war-genre clichés. Nicolas Cage gives a sulking, Suffering Through Silence performance, and the film, while often aesthetically beautiful, is also morally questionable – the heroic Navajos exist primarily to provide ethical conundrums for their (white) comrades.

XXX – Pure Soulless Hollywood Product, and apparently, exactly what some people want from summertime entertainment. It should be said that director Rob Cohen succeeds competently at his intention of jumpstarting a loud, ass-kicking blockbuster franchise, but it's impossible to connect to any movie in which even the characters onscreen aren't connecting with it. Vin Diesel's "Who gives a crap?" implacability serves only to point out that XXX is nothing but the sum of its action scenes, and while they're well-done, there isn't a true thrill on display.