Written by Mike Schulz
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***THE BANGER SISTERS***

*The Banger Sisters* is a textbook example of the alchemy that can occur when two movie stars, stuck in a rather worthless vehicle, say, “What the hell, let’s run with it.”

Most of writer-director Bob Dolman’s piece, about the reunion of two former rock groupies, is inane, but Goldie Hawn and Susan Sarandon invest their roles with so much heartfelt emotion that they completely win you over; you can bemoan the film’s contrivances and obviousness and, thanks to the efforts of the leading ladies, still have a good time. Hawn plays the free-spirited Suzette, who travels from L.A. to Phoenix to reconnect with Sarandon’s uptight Lavinia; the women were inseparable 30 years prior, but now Lavinia is a respectable wife and mother, and Suzette’s arrival threatens to shatter her “perfect” existence. We all know what to expect. Suzette and Lavinia will initially clash, but Suzette’s passion for life will eventually cause Lavinia to loosen up, change out of her beige-on-beige outfits, and get a kicky new hairdo; Suzette, meanwhile, will learn to be more responsible and perhaps even fall in love. (Because *The Banger Sisters* is more chick-flick comedy than chick-flick drama, the film ends with hugs instead of one of the characters’ deaths.) You go, girls!

If I were to read that plot synopsis, and if I didn't have a professional curiosity in catching a new Hawn/Sarandon release, you'd have to drag me to *The Banger Sisters* kicking and screaming. On viewing the film, I also felt an instant foreboding upon realizing that Suzette's and Lavinia's friendship was going to deeply affect Lavinia's bland hubby (Robin Thomas) and ungrateful daughters (Erika Christensen and Eva Amurri), and that "comic relief" would be supplied by Geoffrey Rush as a constipated screenwriter who is pathologically anal-retentive, hasn't had sex in 10 years, and plans to shoot his father. I resisted the movie for as long as I could. What I wasn't prepared for, though, was the utter sincerity that would emanate from Hawn and Sarandon; terrific performers though they are, I thought it would be miraculous if they both made it out of *The Banger Sisters* with their talent and dignity intact.

Sometimes miracles happen. Although both actresses appear too busily "in character" at the start – Hawn with her flower-child abandon, Sarandon with her purse-lipped propriety – once their characters begin to cool down, something marvelously liberating is released in the duo. Not only do Hawn and Sarandon actually convince as lifelong friends, they manage to suggest both the voracious thrill of their misspent youth and the sadness and fear that come with moving past that heady time. While the film does feature some good, cheerfully profane laughs, its best moments are in its silences; Sarandon has a devastating scene at the dinner table in which the full measure of what Lavinia has lost is recorded in her expression, and Hawn's astonishingly expressive face is such a whirligig of contrasting emotions that the strength of her performance is a bit of a shock. (Much has been made in the press about Hawn's playing a groupie a mere two years after real-life daughter Kate Hudson played one in *Almost Famous*, and indeed, Suzette plays like Penny Lane gone to seed.) Goldie Hawn and Susan Sarandon are absolutely smashing in *The Banger Sisters*, and whatever reservations you might rightfully have about the film are outweighed by the chance to see these two performers, both looking impossibly beautiful, bringing out the best in mostly crummy material, and in one another.

***THE FOUR FEATHERS***

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there's nothing debilitatingly wrong with *The Four*

*Feathers* that couldn't be fixed by re-casting its three leads. In this sixth cinematic re-telling of A.E.W. Mason's 1902 adventure novel, a cowardly Englishman (Heath Ledger) abandons the British Army on the eve of war in the Sudan yet feels so racked with guilt and shame that he returns to battle, in the guise of an Arabian, to aid his allies without their knowledge.

Aside from the casting, director Shekhar Kapur's biggest mistake is his insistence on treating this tale so dramatically. Loaded as it is with stunning coincidences and improbabilities, in which characters continually run into each other at the exact right time and place for the plot to press forward, *The Four Feathers* practically demands a lighter touch than Kapur provides. The horrific, realistic battle and torture scenes are brilliantly staged and executed, stunningly photographed by Robert Richardson, and all wrong for the material.

Yet Kapur's heavy-handedness doesn't thoroughly damage the project; the actors do. Ledger, Wes Bentley as The Best Friend, and (ironically, in light of *The Banger Sisters'* same-day opening) Kate Hudson as The Girl are so strikingly inappropriate for their roles that it almost seems a sort of joke, and not just because none of them is British. Ledger, so fine in his brief *Monster's Ball* role, seems to have acquired Tom Cruise Syndrome, in which he'll emote his heart out and then appear to have no memory of the experience in the following scene – there's no through-line to his performance – while Bentely is all shifty-eyed huffiness and Hudson doesn't appear to be in the right *century*, let alone the right country. (Accents usually don't bother me much, but it must be said that hers here is godawful.) *The Four Feathers* had the makings of a first-rate adventure, but its stars veer it uncomfortably toward the comedic.

***TRAPPED***

I'm astounded that the thriller *Trapped* was ever released, let alone *made*, because I can't imagine anyone remotely enjoying it. In the course of the film's way-too-long 100 minutes, we're treated to the kidnapping of young Dakota Fanning, the emotional torture of mom Charlize Theron, a slashing with a scalpel, Dakota's painful-looking asthma attacks, a threatened castration, three different women being violently punched in the face, the most humiliating overacting of Kevin Bacon's career, and, to top it all off, the sight of Courtney Love taking a bubble bath. How do these projects ever get off the ground?
*Trapped*
is one of those repellant little movies that makes you feel dirty and ugly for having seen it; after viewing it, you don't exit the theatre so much as escape it. As far as the film's actual presentation is concerned, Theron, Fanning, and Pruitt Taylor Vince do what they can, but the script is a combination of the insanely melodramatic and the blatantly ridiculous, and director Luis Mandoki shoots the project in a jittery, hand-held style, making the camerawork in
*Trapped*
more nausea-inducing than what the filmmaking novices of
*The Blair Witch Project*
provided, and Mandoki doesn't have their excuse. For those who are keeping track, Mr. Mandoki also helmed the stilted weepies
*Angel Eyes*
and
*Message in a Bottle*
;
*Trapped*
proves he's incompetent in other genres, too.