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PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

Punch-Drunk Love is exactly what its writer-director, Paul Thomas Anderson, claims it to be – "an art-house Adam Sandler movie" – yet I can't be alone in thinking: What's the point of *that*? Is Anderson merely trying to show up the hacks who've directed Sandler in other films? (Again: What's the point?) All throughout, the movie is beautifully filmed, exquisitely composed, and filled with Anderson's uncanny knack for stretching a scene out longer than it should humanly run and making you hang on every delirious second of it.

But even though I've seen a lot of worse movies this year, *Punch-Drunk Love* just might be 2002's most infuriating. Anderson has made the most technically accomplished Sandler movie ever, but all that technique does is exacerbate the witlessness of the Sandler formula. (Those unfamiliar with Sandler's output might very well enjoy the film.)

My problem is not that *Punch-Drunk Love* stars Mr. Sandler; he's certainly better than he ever has been before, and he's obviously giving Anderson exactly what he wants. (Anderson is on record as *adoring* Sandler's comedies.) But yet again, we're given Sandler as a pathologically shy, creepy virgin, barely repressing (and often reveling in) reserves of explosive anger, and a host of supporting characters who don't seem to notice that this man is a freak whose company they should escape immediately. Again, romance blossoms, this time between Sandler and poor Emily Watson, whose one personality trait is that she apparently doesn't mind dating psychopaths. Again, a bully shows up (in the form of Philip Seymour Hoffman), and, through his detestation of Sandler, seems like the only sane person in the movie. Change a detail here or there, and you have an *auteur*'s *Mr. Deeds*, or *The Waterboy*, or *Billy Madison*. We Anderson aficionados have been waiting since 1999 for his next act, and we're stuck with *this*?

You give *Punch-Drunk Love* the benefit of the doubt for quite a while; bizarre, quirky things keep happening in it (though nothing tops its opening, involving an out-of-nowhere car accident), and you assume that Anderson will find some amazing way to corral all of its seemingly unrelated plot strands into a cohesive, comic vision. It never happens. (The "it's raining frogs" sequence in Anderson's *Magnolia* made far more sense than anything in *Punch-Drunk Love*.) Numerous individual scenes are clever, even inspired, but they don't connect, and there's not one that involves you emotionally in any way. (The film's love story is a complete bust, because you can't see what possible reason Watson would have for liking Sandler, and Sandler doesn't yet possess the acting chops to suggest he's anything but a slow-talking basket case.) Anderson's previous films, *Magnolia* especially, have been so filled with emotion that, even at *Magnolia*'s three-plus hours, they felt as though they might burst; *Punch-Drunk Love* runs half that length and feels completely empty. Anderson did fulfill his goal, though – he made an art-house Adam Sandler movie. Big deal.

TUCK EVERLASTING

Truth be told, I was a little apprehensive about Disney's *Tuck Everlasting*, as I have a lower saccharin tolerance than most, and whenever I see advertising blurbs touting "a family film for the ages," my defenses go up immediately; what I usually encounter is pastoral, maudlin, and dull. But *Tuck Everlasting* is pretty darned wonderful. Based on Natalie Babbitt's beloved children's novel about a young girl and a family who stumble upon the fountain of youth, the movie is sweet without being cloying, gorgeous to look at, and, at 90 minutes, blessedly short – it's a live-action family film that won't make kids *or*

their parents fidgety. Jay Russell directs at a lovely, soothing pace, and his stellar cast includes William Hurt, Sissy Spacek, Ben Kingsley, Scott Bairstow, Amy Irving, and Victor Garber, all of whom deliver a fine combination of earnestness and edge. Best of the lot, though, is Alexis Bledel in the lead. While she might be a tad modern for the film's 1914 setting (as is Jonathan Jackson as her beau), she has intensely searching eyes and displays an effortless grace; she's the rare audience surrogate for whom you feel truly protective, and by the film's end, her seemingly simple performance proves to be incredibly nuanced. Just when I had made a vow to stop getting misty-eyed by Disneyfied manipulation, along comes Alexis Bledel to break my heart all over again. Damn her.

IGBY GOES DOWN* and *FULL FRONTAL

If you haven't yet, I urge you to pop down to the Quad Cities Brew & View in the District of Rock Island, an absolutely charming establishment that, in the past two weeks alone, has presented the area debuts of Steven Soderbergh's *Full Frontal* and Burr Steers's *Igby Goes Down*. If the Brew & View's relaxed atmosphere and the incredible hospitality of the staff weren't reason enough to visit – not to mention the chance to enjoy a gin-and-tonic along with your movie – the opportunity to catch these (and future) anti-mainstream works certainly should be. As for the movies themselves ... well, at least
Igby
is terrific.

A Salinger-esque portrait of youthful alienation and confusion, *Igby* is, by turns, wickedly funny and shockingly poignant, powered by a note-perfect portrayal by Kieran Culkin as a wealthy 16-year-old who, like all 16-year-olds, knows everything and nothing about life and love. Steers, in his writing-directing debut, has a marvelous eye and ear for the foibles of affluent Manhattanites, and while he gets typically strong work from Susan Sarandon and Jeff Goldblum, he also elicits career-best performances from Amanda Peet and Ryan Phillippe, and the finest work Claire Danes and Bill Pullman have offered in ages. Steers shows a talent similar to Whit Stillman's but with a more generous heart; may he have a long, productive career.

No one can accuse Steven Soderbergh of not being productive – nowadays we get, what, six or seven Soderbergh releases annually? – but *Full Frontal* (opening at Moline's Nova 6 Cinemas on November 1) is an argument for his being a little less so. Not that the film is wholly unenjoyable. A movie about people making a movie about the making of a movie (I think), *Full Frontal* is definitely clever, Byzantine in its twists, and occasionally funny; it might require a warped sense of humor to laugh at Nicky Katt as the navel-gazing dictator in the film's crappy, modernized Hitler play, but I found him mighty amusing. Yet the movie is unsatisfying, because its flips in tone and style are completely arbitrary, and except for Katt, the cast, who improvised much of their dialogue, looks desperate and confused (which you'd think wouldn't happen with the likes of Julia Roberts, Catherine Keener, and David Duchovny). *Full Frontal* is a lark, a folly, for Soderbergh, and one has to assume he had a better time with it than the cast (or the audience).