

"The Hours" Among the Year's Best: Also, "Narc" and "Just Married"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 21 January 2003 18:00

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THE HOURS

Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* is so meticulously crafted, so assured in its conception, and so insistent on its themes and motifs that it's bound to drive a lot of people bananas.

Even before the opening credits are completed, you know the film's m.o.: We begin in England in 1923, where Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) composes the first sentence of her eventual masterpiece, *Mrs. Dalloway*. We then cut to southern California, circa 1951, where depressed housewife Laura Bown (Julianne Moore) is reading that sentence. Then we're brought to Greenwich Village in 2001, where editor Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep) is, in effect, *acting out*

that first sentence. Within the film's first five minutes, you know exactly what Daldry and screenwriter David Hare, adapting Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, are up to; we're going to follow one day in the life of each of these women, seeing how their lives and paths connect both to

Mrs. Dalloway

and to one another.

The Hours

is so controlled and pre-destined that your choices are to either go with the flow, reveling in its planned perfection, or to loathe the film for being so rigid and contrived. (Like the equally divisive

Moulin Rouge

,

The Hours

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has the distinction of being named Best Picture from the National Board of Review
and
being named
Time
magazine's Worst Film of the Year.)

I loved *The Hours*. Every second of it. I loved the unbelievably artful interweaving of time and place, the brilliance of the recurring images and lines of dialogue, the eerie accuracy of the design. I loved the haunting, intentional repetitiveness of Philip Glass' score (which, in some circles, is being reviled even more than the film itself). And I *really* loved the performances. Nicole Kidman, unrecognizable as Woolf, employs a devastating emotional fierceness, a hostile battle against impending insanity that gives her every line and gesture an element of the unexpected. The economy of Meryl Streep's acting is a thrill to behold; "goodness" is almost impossible to portray in an interesting manner, but Streep makes Clarissa's self-sacrificing decency positively beguiling. And Julianne Moore, playing the dark flip-side to her magnificent

Far from Heaven

character, compensates for her paucity of dialogue by allowing us to read Laura's desperation and instability in her wondrously expressive face; as the combined knockout of

Far from Heaven

and

The Hours

proves, perhaps not since the silent era has an actress been able to reveal so much without saying a thing. Supporting this roster of talent are a group of astonishing actors – Ed Harris, Miranda Richardson, Allison Janney, Claire Danes, Stephen Dillane, John C. Reilly – who have to present us with a fully realized performance given only two or three scenes and, amazingly, pull it off, and a couple of actors – Toni Collette and Jeff Daniels – who are able to do the job in *one*

. There are almost a ridiculous number of great films in current release –

The Two Towers

,
Adaptation

,
Gangs of New York

,
Bowling for Columbine

– and, if you let its magic work for you,

The Hours

will rank right near the top.

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NARC

As a genre piece, there's very little about *Narc* that's distinctive. The film, a police thriller that works overtime at being "gritty," is like a big-screen version of TV's

The Shield

or

The Wire

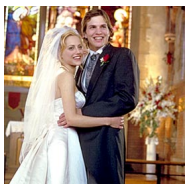
, and centers on a genre staple: Two undercover cops (Jason Patric and Ray Liotta) attempt to hunt down the killer of one of their own, and discover that the trail leads to all manner of corruption, drug abuse, extortion, and brutality. That, and the lingering question: Is one of the cops actually the murderer himself? Writer-director Joe Carnahan trots out all the cop-movie clichés in the book, right down to the "I can't take it anymore" speech by a long-suffering wife and the obligatory twist ending, but thankfully, his direction is far more impressive. The frenetic action scenes have a scuzzier, more disturbing quality than you're used to – they have real bite – yet Carnahan also gives his characters room to breathe and make an impression; Liotta's cop delivers an extended, intense monologue in his car, and it's the best scene in the movie. (It's also the best performance Liotta has given in at least a decade.)

Narc

is pretty formulaic stuff, but it's impressively performed and staged, and compared to something like the grandiloquent, overrated

Training Day

, it's a respectable model of its genre.



JUST MARRIED

A time-honored tradition recently came to pass, as the nation's movie reviewers teamed up to annihilate the first new Hollywood release of 2003. The reasoning for this annual event is

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twofold: (1) Generally, the first new Hollywood release of any given year does indeed blow, and (2) It's an easy way for critics to warn audiences that Hollywood product this year will, in all likelihood, be as crappy as it was last year. Yet, for the life of me, I can't understand why reviewers have been gunning for the romantic comedy *Just Married*, which features Brittany Murphy and Ashton Kutcher as youths whose European honeymoon goes disastrously afoul. Sure, the movie is shticky and predictable, and judged solely as a work of competent cinema, it's rather clunky; the film employs a lazy flashback structure that doesn't always contain the scenes it promises to (as when Kutcher reveals that he screwed up the marriage proposal, yet we never actually see him screw up the marriage proposal). Those complaints aside, though, *Just Married* is an absolute hoot, filled with tangible romantic *and* comedic chemistry between the leads, and about 10 times more fun than *Maid in Manhattan* and *Two Weeks Notice* combined.

I think what's bothering a lot of reviewers is that Murphy and Kutcher are so damned *young*. There seems to be an unwritten law that, in order to merit respect, romantic comedies must feature performers who've lived a little – Sandra Bullock, Jennifer Lopez, Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, and any of the handsome, unthreatening men they're generally paired with – so the romances can feel *earned*

. Poor Sandra – nearing 40 and still single! Yet it's that very quality of middle-aged angst that makes most romantic comedies so dreary; they tend to be void of the giddy *joy*

of romance, and the passion and excitement of it, too. In

Just Married

, Murphy and Kutcher interact with such palpable, high-spirited energy and go-for-broke comic instinct – they're both surprisingly dexterous physical comedians – that you leave the theatre beaming; during the movie's entire 90-minute running length, I don't think I ever stopped grinning, and I laughed out loud a good dozen times. The film, throwaway though it is, is exactly what reviewers should want from Hollywood this time of year – something light, speedy, and entertaining as all get-out. Ignore the (other) critics and have a great time.