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CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND

George Clooney's directorial debut, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, plays like the funny, ironic companion piece to *A Beautiful Mind*, and the new film shrewdly, and hysterically, plays off your knowledge of Ron Howard's Oscar-winning opus.

A Beautiful Mind's tale of schizophrenic brilliance was designed as a highbrow weepie, where John Nash – as well as the audience – was devastated to learn that his top-secret dealings with governmental agencies were all in his head. *Confessions'* goofball protagonist, game-show creator/host Chuck Barris (Sam Rockwell), believes that the entire time he foisted his cheesy TV programs on the American public he was simultaneously acting as a CIA assassin, amassing 30-odd killings during his tenure as a spy. We viewers, naturally, assume that Barris was as mentally disturbed as Nash, because we now recognize the cinematic warning signs; whenever Barris has an encounter with a fellow CIA operative (Julia Roberts and Clooney himself play Barris' most frequent visitors), no one else is within earshot of the conversation, and no one from Barris' "real" life, including his devoted lover (Drew Barrymore), ever has any contact with Barris' CIA cohorts. Ah, we intelligent cinephiles think, we've been here before (not just in

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A Beautiful Mind

, but in

The Sixth Sense

and

Fight Club

, too). It's all a fantasy. And then what do Clooney and that mad screenwriting genius Charlie Kaufman go and do? Confound us with the distinct possibility that yes, indeed, this story is actually true. Damn them.

Those who bristled at *Adaptation's* final half hour – in which the filmmakers stubbornly refused to tell you which events were fictional and which were “real” – might be similarly annoyed by *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*

. It's becoming clear, however, that movies with Charlie Kaufman screenplays –

Being John Malkovich

,
Adaptation

,
Human Nature

, and now this – are practically a genre unto themselves; in a Kaufman script, the only “real” world is the one we're presented with for those two hours in the darkened movie theatre. (You have to accept his plotlines the same way you accept one involving an alien world in a sci-fi work.) In the film of

Confessions

, as in the autobiography it's based on, Chuck Barris is a game-show host

and

a hitman, and the fact that Barris might have hallucinated his murderous adventures, or simply made them up, is immaterial.

Once you let go of your preconceived notions of what the film's “reality” is, *Confessions*, like *Being John Malkovich*

and

Adaptation

before it, proves to be a thrilling, even liberating, work, made more manifest by Clooney's amazingly playful direction. It's rare to find an actor-turned-director with a strong visual sense – Robert Redford, Rob Reiner, Ron Howard, and the like have made some fine movies that are rarely interesting to

look

at – yet Clooney, in this first outing, sure seems to possess one; he appears to have learned a lot from David O. Russell and the Coen brothers, whom he previously worked for. Clooney's staging is stylized as all get-out yet unfailingly clever – this bizarre, rambunctious tragicomedy would fail if presented any other way – and it really

moves

"Confessions" Offers a Funny, Twisted World: "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind," "Kangaroo Jack," "A

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Confessions

runs nearly two hours, and I don't think there's a boring moment in the movie. Carrying the film on his shoulders – he appears in every scene – is Sam Rockwell, who gives a startlingly inventive performance that manages to both veer from the "true" Barris and honor him at the same time (as a youth whose misspent childhood involved countless viewings of

The Gong Show

, I can say that his Barris incarnation is often uncanny); it'd be a shame if Oscar voters ignored him. Audience members willing to get on Charlie Kaufman's unique wavelength will find themselves in heaven with

Confessions of a Dangerous Mind

; hopefully, someday, the rest of the nation's moviegoers will join us, as Mr. Kaufman is one of the rare film artists striving to make American movies

un

predictable.



KANGAROO JACK, A GUY THING, and NATIONAL SECURITY

In a commentary track on the recently released DVD of *All About Eve*, Christopher Mankiewicz says that most directors he knows set out to make a good movie; this seems like a thuddingly obvious statement, but he does make a point. Mankiewicz goes on to say, in effect, that if you're aiming to make a good movie and fail, you're merely left with a bad movie, but if you're

trying

to make a bad movie – which, in Mankiewicz's view, includes any average, run-of-the-mill piece of Hollywood crap – and fail at

that

, what you're left with will probably be god-awful. Using this argument, I think it's safe to say that the creators of

Kangaroo Jack

,

A Guy Thing

, and

National Security

all set out to make bad movies. And failed.

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Of the three, *Kangaroo Jack*, astonishingly, is the *least* offensive. Don't get me wrong, it's terrible, but it's terrible in ways that young audiences typically fall for and don't seem to *mind*

falling for – lots of car chases and crashes, fart jokes, moronic plotting, embarrassing acting, and a CGI character that kicks people in the face. You know going in exactly what you're going to get – no one entering

Kangaroo Jack

is expecting

wit

– so when the film manages to give Anthony Anderson the occasional amusing moment and allows Christopher Walken to be legitimately hilarious in his five-minute role, it feels like rain in the desert.



A Guy Thing is far worse, because while the story has been done to death – groom-to-be falls for his fiancée's cousin – stars Jason Lee and Julia Stiles have often been entertaining, and topnotch comediennes Julie Hagerty and Diana Scarwid show up as the leads' mothers. The film, though, is pitiful, achingly predictable and unfunny, and Lee and Stiles display nothing in the way of chemistry.

A Guy Thing also revels in perhaps the most unappealing of recent cinematic trends: seeing just how much scatological humor a PG-13 movie can withstand before the censors close up shop. So, if your idea of entertainment is watching Jason Lee battle a severe case of crabs, by all means attend. And bring the kids! It's PG-13!



As for *National Security*, I don't know what to say. I did, however, learn this: Martin Lawrence is black. No, really. I know because he informs us of this fact in his *every line of dialogue*

. Lawrence's buddy comedies are generally loud, puerile, and insufferable, but

National Security

represents a new low for the hyperactive hipster. By now, even his fan base must be tiring of Lawrence's "You're keeping me down 'cause I'm

black!

" rants; in this latest movie, they're regurgitated so often that he begins to appear deranged, and that's

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not

the film's intention. Playing Lawrence's partner, Steve Zahn and his dyspeptic bluster might possibly be funny if

you

didn't want to smack the hell out of Lawrence, too.