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THE LIFE OF DAVID GALE

Reading the reviews for Alan Parker's *The Life of David Gale*, you might assume that it's the most staggeringly offensive cinematic release since *Freddy Got Fingered*. (Glenn Kenny of *Premiere* magazine and Roger Ebert gave the film a *combined* total of zero stars.) And upon realizing that the film in question boasts the considerable acting abilities of Kevin Spacey, Kate Winslet, and Laura Linney, not to mention direction by two-time Oscar nominee Alan Parker, you'd have every right to wonder: Can the movie be *that* god-awful? The short answer is: No, it's not. Parker's film is bad, yes, but it's bad in typical Hollywood fashion, especially for a paranoid thriller; the plot twists are ludicrous, the dialogue, especially when dealing directly with the film's polemic over the death penalty, is clunky, and it's so high on its do-gooder mentality that it comes off as vaguely embarrassing. But despite what you might have read, it's not the work of Lucifer, merely the work of talented individuals acting uncharacteristically like hacks.

The film reaches new levels of Oh-the-irony!, Hollywood-style, as death-penalty abolitionist David Gale (Spacey) finds himself on Texas' death row for the rape and murder of a colleague (Linney); Gale has four days – four days! – to get reporter Bitsey Bloom (Winslet) to believe in his innocence and get him released. Start to finish, *David Gale* is borderline laughable, especially when the noble reporter finds herself being tailed by a shadowy cowboy driving a beater; it's as if she wandered into a reel of *Blood Simple*. Yet though the characters are ridiculous, the actors – particularly Linney – give it their all, and though Parker's direction is wildly melodramatic and didactic, at least the film *moves*. I think *David Gale* is being greeted with such vociferous loathing because it takes a sacrosanct debate subject and turns it into fodder for a silly, glorified-B-movie thriller. Sure, that's offensive, but why is anyone *surprised* by this? Turning the stuff of tragedy into entertainment is what Hollywood *does*

, and although
The Life of David Gale
isn't worth the ink being spilled over it, there are certainly far
worse
cinematic offenses out there to get in a snit over.

OLD SCHOOL

Just when I thought Hollywood gross-out comedies were no longer able to surprise me, along comes Todd Phillips' *Old School*, which concerns a trio of aging frat boys who establish their *o wn*
fraternity and begin to relive the debaucherous days of their youth. The movie isn't very good, nor is it consistently funny, but it does pull off a trick that I, personally, found miraculous: Will Ferrell made me laugh. A
lot
. Ever since his debut on
Saturday Night Live
in 1995, this man's gifts have been totally lost on me. He always seemed less dry-comic than
stiff
-comic; no matter what skit or character he was assigned, his performances all featured the same disengaged hostility posing as wit, and he appeared to make a style out of being unable to read a line and have it make sense. (He seemed to be hired to fill the utility-player gap after Phil Hartman's departure, but Ferrell seemed incapable of creating
two
unique characters, let alone hundreds.) His affected nonchalance on TV worked to his advantage only occasionally,
à la
his amusing Alex Trebek impersonation, but in his subsequent film work – especially in the otherwise hilarious
Superstar
,
Zoolander
, and
Jay & Silent Bob Strike Back

– Ferrell appeared out-of-sync with his fellow performers, desperately trying, and failing, to find his laughs.

Not so this time. As a recent groom irrationally terrified of being henpecked, Ferrell is a stitch; his character's fear of losing his boyishness is palpable, which adds both comic urgency to all of his ridiculous antics and a surprising undercurrent of poignancy. Joining him are Vince Vaughn, as a sweetly crude hubby who makes sure his infant son covers his ears before Vaughn spouts obscenities, and Luke Wilson, as the token straight man; this threesome contributes a lot of relaxed, amusing banter to *Old School*. Too bad the filmmakers don't know what to do with it. After the film's opening third, which earns a lot of laughs, the film's humor vacillates between not-so-funny and what-the-hell-were-they-thinking?, especially when the
de rigueur
guest stars – Andy Dick, Craig Kilborn, James Carville – begin popping up. The movie loses steam and edge all too quickly – you can actually
feel
the expectant audience's disappointment – but any film that can make Mr. Ferrell give an inventive performance isn't to be completely discounted.

DELIVER US FROM EVA

Like *Old School*, *Deliver Us from Eva* falls apart after a seriously funny first half-hour. Unlike Todd Phillips' slob opus, however, the tone of Gary Hardwick's
Eva
remains genial all throughout; aided immeasurably by the talents of his leading actors, the movie stays afloat. Barely. Hardwick's film is a romantic comedy, which must mean that it revolves around some type of ruse or wager; like the recent, inferior
How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days
,
Eva
has the
cojones
to revolve around
both

. At the start, health inspector Eva Dandridge (Gabrielle Union) is a major pain in the ass who, by subtly controlling her three sisters' lives, make life hell for her siblings' romantic partners. In an effort to rid themselves of Eva, the men pay lothario Ray (James Todd Smith, the artist formerly known as LL Cool J) $5,000 to romance her and get her off their backs. Would you believe that true love blossoms between the two? Would you believe their relationship becomes threatened when the truth is inevitably revealed? Can you believe that screenwriters still think this qualifies as an acceptable plot?

Once Eva lightens up under the adoring glow of Ray, the movie has pretty much run its course; there isn't an audience member in the world who'll find *Eva*'s events remotely surprising, and the film's humor all but thoroughly evaporates. Sure, romantic comedies nowadays are practically required to be "touching," which invariably makes them maudlin – audiences now seem to *demand* sap with their sugar – but there's no denying the fact that *Deliver Us from Eva* is at its finest, and funniest, *before* the leading lady gets her personality makeover. Gabrielle Union, who has often been terrific in minor roles, delivers her tongue-twisting insults with such venomous glee that I, for one, never wanted her to become a better person; movies need as many comically malevolent forces of nature as they can get. Ms. Union and LL Cool J – sorry, I mean *Mr. Smith* – are a wonderful pair of sparring partners, and the supporting cast adds fine backup, but despite their hard work, *Deliver Us from Eva* winds up, against all logic, agreeable yet bland. Really, how excited can you be about a movie that deliberately trashes its best qualities?