

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 18 March 2003 18:00

---



### ***BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE***

Since she executive-produced the film, I shouldn't feel too badly for Queen Latifah in *Bringing Down the House*; she obviously knew what she was getting into.

Yet I found absolutely no joy in watching her be routinely humiliated. In the film, she disrupts Steve Martin's staid lifestyle with her bold and brassy ways, and is met, in scene after scene, by odious bigots who refer to her as "Shaniqua" and "Jemima"; though the point of the film, of course, lies in the Queen exposing these folks as hateful and ridiculous, the idea that all of Southern California is mired in such a disgusting, antiquated mindset destroys any possible humor this fish-out-of-water comedy might have produced. Queen Latifah has never been this vibrant and beautiful onscreen, and Martin, Eugene Levy, Joan Plowright, and Jean Smart do what they can to keep it afloat. But this predictable and unfunny work is a grotesque waste of everyone's talents and, in one vicious fight scene between Queen Latifah's character and Martin's sister-in-law, features the most staggeringly wrong-headed sequence I've witnessed in all of 2003's crummy releases. A plague on this *House*!



### ***TEARS OF THE SUN***

Action fare with a conscience is a sickly thing. In *Tears of the Sun*, Bruce Willis and a group of commandoes attempt a rescue in a Nigerian war zone, and the movie vacillates between being a celebration of gung-ho Americana and an indictment of the horrors of war, and the combination can make you feel queasy. (It's hard to feel for the plight of our heroes, and the innocent Nigerians they're shepherding, when every action sequence aims for a "Wow! Good one!" effect.) Antoine Fuqua directs the proceedings with far more finesse than he brought to

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 18 March 2003 18:00

---

### *Training Day*

, but that finesse is being put to the service of a completely indecisive and unfocused film, one that appears to feel guilty about whipping its audiences into a Rambo-ized frenzy. In the lead role, Willis proves again, so soon after

### *Hart's War*

, that he's never more boring than when deprived of his humor.



### ***WILLARD***

There's nothing all that wrong with the remake of the horror staple *Willard* aside from the fact that it's not scary and it's not funny. (Okay, I guess there's a

*little*

something wrong with that.) Director Glen Morgan shows some flair for Hitchcockian suspense, and the rat effects are certainly impressive, but in the end,

*Willard*

is something I

*never*

thought it would be – admirable without being entertaining (though it does feature one scene of comedic genius where the rodents make a frisky tabby wet himself). R. Lee Ermey and Jackie Burroughs manage some first-rate caricatures, but despite how theoretically perfect Crispin Glover might seem for the title role, his endless shrieking and sobbing – complete with torrential streams of tears and mucus – wear down your tolerance; as usual, Glover goes

*so*

far beyond acceptable performance levels that you don't know

*what*

to make of him. (Willard's potential-girlfriend role is played by

*Mulholland Dr.*

's Laura Elena Harring, who seems the nuttiest person onscreen for finding this weirdo even the slightest bit attractive.)

*Willard*

is technically adept, to be sure, but anyone hoping for guilty-pleasure fun is bound to be disappointed. Rats!

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 18 March 2003 18:00

---



### **CRADLE 2 THE GRAVE**

*Cradle 2 the Grave* is little more than a standard, in-your-face action flick, but it opens with a scene that's such a delightful play on genre clichés that I'm still giggling over it. The setup: Our roguish anti-heroes are attempting a diamond heist, and while they infiltrate the diamonds' vault, gorgeous Gabrielle Union is commissioned to "distract" a security guard. There's one problem, though: The guard, Union quickly gleans, is gay. So she abandons her mission and, much to his chagrin, sends Anthony Anderson in to finish the job. If you've sat through enough brainless Hollywood blow-'em-ups, a sequence like this, which defies all genre expectations and displays surprising wit, can put you in a giddy frame of mind for the entire picture. *Cradle*

never quite lives up to its opening scene, and Jet Li doesn't get as many ass-kicking scenes as you might like, but it's diverting enough, director Andrzej Bartkowiak gives it some grungy style, and Union, Anderson, DMX, Kelly Hu, and even Tom Arnold (!) look to be having a great time. It's the kind of movie late-night cable was invented for, yet you're not necessarily a sucker for catching it on the big screen.



### **RABBIT-PROOF FENCE**

Though I'm sure it often appears as if I'm on its payroll, your best bet for cinematic enchantment these days is at the Quad Cities Brew & View, which, in addition to the incomparable *Far from Heaven*, is

currently showing

*Rabbit-Proof Fence*

, an absolutely terrific 2002 release making its area debut. Based on the true story of three Aborigine girls who escape an Australian training school and begin a 1,500-mile trek back

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 18 March 2003 18:00

---

home, Phillip Noyce's film is heartbreaking yet inspiring, a top-tier entertainment of simplicity and beauty. It doesn't explore its themes of racism and familial bonds with enough depth to qualify as a

*great*

work, yet it's an impassioned one, made with skill and charm; though parents are dutifully bringing their kids to

*Agent Cody Banks*

and

*The Jungle Book 2*

, this is the film they

*should*

be encouraging them to see. Chief among the movie's pleasures are Christopher Doyle's astonishing cinematography and Peter Gabriel's evocative score, and Noyce's work with the three untrained actresses who play the girls is astounding.



## OSCAR PREDICTIONS

And finally, since I can't let a year pass without looking like an ass for incorrectly predicting the Oscar victors, the winners on March 23 "will" be ...

**BEST PICTURE:** *Chicago*. The surest best in this category since *Saving Private Ryan*. Hmmm ... wait a minute ... .

**BEST DIRECTOR:** Rob Marshall for *Chicago*. Two of Martin Scorsese's previous losses in this category were to first-time directors. What the hell, let's make it three!

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 18 March 2003 18:00

---

**BEST ACTOR:** Daniel Day-Lewis for *Gangs of New York*. Because, much as they love Jack, the Academy doesn't seem crazy about *Schmidt*

, because Adrien Brody is too much of a newcomer, and because Day-Lewis is the best actor on the planet.

**BEST ACTRESS:** Renee Zellweger for *Chicago*. Actresses weeping through their acceptance speeches – think Halle and Gwyneth – make for good television, and that SAG Award probably sealed Zellweger's victory.

**BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR:** Chris Cooper for *Adaptation*. Despite considerable competition from Christopher Walken, I'm thinking Cooper's just too good to ignore.

**BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS:** Meryl Streep for *Adaptation*. Conventional wisdom says this is Catherine Zeta-Jones's to lose, but scuttlebutt has it that Hollywoodites consider her ... well, a bitch. Streep, on the other hand, is universally adored, and as she hilariously reminded us in her Golden Globe speech, she hasn't won anything "since the Pleistocene era." That's about to change. I hope.