

"Phone Booth" the Class of 2003 So Far: Also, "Basic" and "Head of State"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 08 April 2003 18:00

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PHONE BOOTH

Joel Schumacher's *Phone Booth* starts off so poorly that it's a major surprise – a shock, really – when the movie winds up being thrilling, even exhilarating; it proves that a great, meaty premise can overcome almost all obstacles.

In outline, the plot couldn't be simpler: Hotshot publicist Stu Shepard (Colin Farrell) answers a ringing pay phone and is told by the malevolent voice on the other end that if he hangs up, he'll be shot dead. This unseen sniper wants Stu to atone for his moral bankruptcy, and Stu, over the course of the film's 80 minutes, has to figure out how to avoid being killed by the madman, how to avoid being killed by the cops who've surrounded the booth – thinking Stu is a murderer himself – and how to keep the lunatic from also killing his wife (Radha Mitchell), who has arrived on the scene.

In general, there's no director whose work I loathe more than Schumacher's, and for the first 15 minutes of *Phone Booth*, I was reminded why; his jangly, restless camera movements – and, this time around, incoherent split-screen effects – result in works that would look chaotic in a music video, and he tends to bring out the worst in his casts, who always seem to be acting to

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the second mezzanine. And initially, Farrell seems stuck in that trap, playing Stu as a pseudo-hipster whose clichéd swagger would appear ridiculous in a touring production of *Guys & Dolls*

. But an amazing thing happens. Once Stu is stuck in that booth, not only does the movie take flight, but Schumacher and Farrell come through with perhaps the finest work of their careers. Schumacher directs the film's escalating tension with verve and immediacy, and Farrell pulls off something unexpected: He makes you realize that Stu's macho blowhard act

is an act. The more desperate Stu becomes, the more Farrell's initial portrayal is revealed to be a façade, and the more heartbreaking he becomes; the movie is little more than a *Twilight Zone*

-y morality tale, but it's undeniably suspenseful, and Farrell gives a startling, extraordinary performance in it. Flawed though it is,

Phone Booth

is edgy and exciting, and it's easily the best that 2003 movies have yet provided.



BASIC

Much has been made about how ridiculously convoluted the wrap-up to John McTiernan's military melodrama *Basic* is, and I won't argue that fact, but it made about as much sense as everything *else* in the film, so the finale didn't really bother me. In this latest rip-off of *Rashomon*, Army investigators John Travolta and Connie Nielsen are enlisted to solve a mystery: What happened to a Special Forces team during a Panamanian mission, and how did most of the team wind up dead? What follows is a series of sequences in which Travolta and Nielsen try to uncover the truth by interviewing those left alive, all of whom have conflicting tales to tell, and those of us who love a good, twisty, who's-screwing-whom flick will soon realize that even the *filmmakers*

don't seem to know, or care; the movie is like an Agatha Christie novel with every other page ripped out. Nothing in *Basic*

holds together, but the film is reasonably diverting anyway – McTiernan keeps the film's 90 minutes moving along at a brisk tempo – and it does feature one portrayal so ludicrously over-the-top that it's practically unmissable. As a wounded gay soldier, the ever-nutty Giovanni Ribisi gives a theatrical, hambone performance that must be seen to be (dis)believed, and

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speaks like the love child of Gary Oldman's Mason Verger in

Hannibal

and Mike Myers' Dr. Evil; you keep waiting for him to say, "I'll tell you what you want to know, Agent Starling ... for one

million

dollars!"



HEAD OF STATE

If I counted correctly, I smiled exactly twice at Chris Rock's directorial debut *Head of State*. The first time was about a half-hour into the film, when Bernie Mac briefly appeared as Rock's older brother. The second time was about half an hour later, when Bernie Mac finally returned. In neither instance does Mac get to say or do anything remotely

funny

, but at least he has the garrulous personality and seasoned wit to make you think he

might

, and in a comedy as stale as

Head of State

, the mere presence of Bernire Mac is about all the amusement you get.

Considering how hilarious, and politically savvy, Chris Rock has been on television and in his stand-up, it's astounding how one-dimensional and dumbed-down-for-mass-consumption *Head of State*

turns out to be. (It would be nice to assign the blame to others, but in addition to directing, Rock co-wrote the screenplay with Ali LeRoi.) Rock plays Mays Gilliam, a Washington, D.C., alderman who, for reasons too Byzantine to discuss here, becomes the Democratic candidate for president. It probably goes without saying that, unbeknownst to Gilliam, the white guy pulling his strings is aching for him to lose the election, but Gilliam turns himself into a viable candidate, speaking up for America's working-class while his Republican rival wraps up his stump speeches with a hearty "God bless America ... and no place else!"

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That's actually a pretty funny line; it becomes far less funny when trotted out for the sixth or seventh time. But this is a film where *every* potentially good gag gets replayed to the point of exhaustion, and that applies to the film's characters, as well. It's kind of amusing when Robin Givens shows up as Rock's power-hungry harpy of an ex-girlfriend, but you grow weary of her one-note shrillness after her introductory scene, and she's by no means the only performer who's treated poorly; perfectly fine actors like Dylan Baker, Lynn Whitfield, and James Rebhorn have nothing to play but dyspepsia and become tiresome within the first reel. Perhaps none of this would matter much if Chris Rock were on top of his game. But anyone hoping Rock would bring to the film some of the political bite of his routines from

Bring the Pain

or

Bigger & Blacker

, or his HBO talk show, is in for a big disappointment; Gilliam's Democratic speeches boil down to generic statements about how the American underclass needs better jobs and more money – who's going to argue with that? (Republicans, apparently.) There's actually a good joke buried there – both Gilliam and his rival make speeches about What Needs to Be Done in America without offering any indication of

how

they'll do it – but it's obviously beyond this movie's level of sophistication; you'll find more political awareness in Rock's five-minute routine on gun control in

Bigger & Blacker

– “We don't need gun control! We need

bullet

control!” – than you'll find in all of

Head of State

. Sadly, that five-minute routine also provides more laughs than you'll find in the 95 minutes here.