

Cast Keeps "Bruce Almighty" Afloat: Also, "The In-Laws"

Written by Mike Schulz
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BRUCE ALMIGHTY

It's been almost 18 months since Jim Carrey last graced the cineplex, but that was in the schmaltzy piece of doggerel *The Majestic*, so it barely counts. For full-out, Carrey-sized insanity, you have to go back to 2000's *Dr. Seuss's How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, but that barely counts either, as he was buried beneath pounds of latex and inevitably forced to water down his act for kiddie consumption.

So it comes as no surprise that you can practically *feel* the goodwill audiences extend toward him at the beginning of *Bruce Almighty*. In this new comedy, Carrey, working again with *Ace Ventura* and *Liar Liar* helmer Tom Shadyac, plays Bruce Nolan, a local-events reporter for a Buffalo TV station. In a none-too-subtle commentary on Carrey's own quest to be a respected Master Thespian, Bruce longs to be an anchor, but is never taken seriously, and after being passed over for a promotion (read: Oscar nomination), he curses God for his rotten luck and accuses Him of controlling the universe Half-Assed.

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God responds. Appearing in the divine personage of Morgan Freeman, He gives Bruce the opportunity to right His wrongs – God makes Bruce a deity to see if he, using all of God's powers, can do a better job himself. The comic possibilities here are literally infinite, yet it's not necessarily disappointing when Bruce uses his newfound omnipotence to become, merely, the ultimate practical joker (which may be how some view God anyway). Bruce's shenanigans – enacting retribution on a group of bullies, teaching his pooch proper bathroom etiquette, annihilating the career of a co-worker (Steven Carell, superb) on live television – are good for numerous chortles, and they even lead to a wonderfully romantic gesture, as Bruce, in a nod to *It's a Wonderful Life*, literally lassos the moon for his girlfriend (Jennifer Aniston).

For nearly an hour, *Bruce Almighty* is entertaining stuff. Yet even while you're enjoying the amusing gags and the sight of Carrey in all his megalomaniacal splendor, you just know you're eventually going to pay for the fun you're having. The formula demands that Bruce realize The Error of His Ways and learn to Become a Better Person, and these life lessons are presented for our benefit, too; *Bruce Almighty* wants to make us all better people. (Nothing derails my enjoyment quite like hectoring.) Considering that director Shadyac's hugest success was with the grisly *Patch Adams*, this should come as no great shock. But with a goodly portion of *Bruce*'s comedic bits falling flat – The *Chariots of Fire* theme? Juan Valdez jokes? Is this 1983? – you wish he wouldn't compound the problem with predictable pap that Carrey, and we, have far outgrown.

What keeps you engaged, even when the material turns to treacle, is the cast. Carrey might just be spinning his wheels – and his naked desire to initiate another national catchphrase ("It's *goo oood*") is more sad than satisfying – but the picture needs every jolt of adrenalin, even ersatz adrenalin, he can give it. Aniston takes the stock role of Neglected Girlfriend and invests it with so much sweetness and truth that you miss her when she's off-screen; it's the first time an actress in a Carrey comedy has been more than window dressing. (And she and Carrey share a gloriously funny pre-coital tackle.) Plus, of course, there's Mr. Freeman. Playing the President in 1998's *Deep Impact*, he was such a figure of grace and stability that adding his visage to Mount Rushmore wouldn't have been out-of-line, and here, playing an unimaginably wise, caring, humorous God, he should inspire the devout to create The Church of Morgan. He and his co-stars aren't quite able to overcome the dreariness that lingers over much of

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Bruce Almighty

, but Freeman's gifts, even in a piece of fluff like this, are enough to make anyone believe in miracles.



THE IN-LAWS

A few weeks ago, on *Saturday Night Live*, Weekend Update anchor Tina Fey announced that Hollywood was considering a remake of *Casablanca* starring – shudder – Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, and editorialized, “This will be the perfect film for people who liked the original but wished it was terrible.” Watching the new remake of *The In-Laws*

, I couldn't get that quote out of my head. To be fair, this version, with Michael Douglas and Albert Brooks inheriting the Peter Falk and Alan Arkin roles, *isn't*

terrible; it features occasional patches of witty dialogue, and Brooks plays dyspeptic and hypochondriac with the best of them. But it's a depressingly formulaic and uninspired piece of work, and naggingly ill-conceived, to boot. It's the perfect film for people who liked the original but wished it was a generic action-comedy.

Adapted from Andrew Bergman's 1979 script, this by-the-numbers affair, directed by Andrew Fleming and written by Nat Mauldin and Ed Solomon, retains the original's basic storyline: Two potential fathers-in-law, one a CIA operative and the other a mild-mannered schlemiel, find themselves involved in a series of dangerous misadventures on the eve of their kids' wedding. But ask any *In-Laws* fan what they remember about the original and it won't be the plot. They will, however, happily recall Falk shouting “Serpentine, Shel!” and Arkin screeching, “There's no reason to shoot at me! I'm a *dentist!*” and Richard Libertini talking to his hand. The original worked *despite* the forced contrivances of the screenplay; the joy came from its nutty fringe moments, and this remake might have been similarly successful if it approached the first film's level of gonzo comic invention.

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Yet this new work feels misguided right from the start. It opens with one of those "exciting" five-minute scenes that's completely tangential to the plot, involving guns and narrow escapes – the *de rigueur* opening sequence for Hollywood action-comedies – and any hope that this new version will retain the original's charm and offbeat goofiness flies right out the window. All throughout the film, scenarios between the leads that threaten to provide big laughs are interrupted by scenes of standard action nonsense; you can practically set your watch by them. And when the promising moments *aren't* waylaid in this manner, they're done in by beyond-tedious subplots – Douglas's character is an absentee father, Brooks doesn't listen to his daughter, that sort of crap. Though

The In-Laws

doesn't give any indication of just how funny Brooks

can

be, he still comes through with some marvelously aghast line readings, and while Douglas is easily outclassed in the comedy department, God knows he's more welcome here than he has been of late. But both are stuck battling a mostly unfortunate supporting cast, a tepid script, and, among many of us, fond memories of the original film. We've experienced numerous cultural improvements since 1979, but this

In-Laws

indicates that Hollywood's collective sense of humor might have actually waned in the last 24 years.