Written by Mike Schulz
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HOLLYWOOD HOMICIDE

During Hollywood’s Summer Blockbuster season, we critical types generally spend three months bemoaning the tired, formulaic scripts that inevitably lead to tired, formulaic summer movies, and when we do find something worth sitting through – *The Matrix Reloaded*, say, or *X 2: X-Men United* – it’s almost always despite the banality of their screenplays. (Which makes the release of a *Finding Nemo*, in which the brilliant execution is matched by an inspired script, even more miraculous.) Who cares about inventive plotting or smart dialogue or even basic *coherence* if, instead, you get to watch Keanu Reeves tussle with a hundred Hugo Weavings? Undemanding, turn-your-brain-off-and-enjoy entertainment certainly has its place, and even those of us with a particular aversion to Hollywood Blockbusters might be inclined to be a bit more generous than usual in our appraisal of empty-headed summertime escapism.

It was with this feeling of “What the hell, maybe it’ll be fun” that I went to see the action comedy *Hollywood Homicide*. Imagine my surprise: The script is terrific. What looked on paper – and in the omnipresent trailers – to be routine buddy-picture nonsense is actually a sharp and witty examination of Southern California eccentricity, as pointed and nutty a satire as the 1991 Steve Martin vehicle *L.A. Story*. Maybe the script’s quality *shouldn’t* be such a surprise; director Ron Shelton, co-writing here with Robert Souza, is responsible for such character-driven comedies as *Bull Durham*, *Tin Cup*, and *White Men Can’t Jump*, and his criminally neglected cop drama *Dark Blue*, from earlier this year, was a powerful, insightful look at the seamy side of California law enforcement. With this new work, Shelton and Souza have created a distinct comic universe

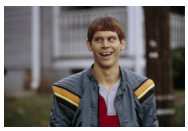
where solving a quadruple homicide is slightly less important than unloading a $7-million house; despite its yawn-inducing trailers and unfortunate title,
Hollywood Homicide
is something that movies during this season almost never are: original.

However, it is my sad duty to report that the ugly stamp of Summer Blockbuster Syndrome weighs down the entire enterprise. Though the script is loose and clever, *Hollywood Homicide* has been directed and, in the leading roles, acted with such a heavy hand that the film winds up more frustrating than engaging; there's a wonderful little screwball comedy aching to escape this su mmertime behemoth, yet it never quite succeeds. The film centers on two mismatched LAPD partners – growling, surly Joe Gavilan (Harrison Ford) and laconic, wispy K.C. Calden (Josh Hartnett) – assigned to investigate the murder of an up-and-coming rap group, yet the investigation proves to be little more than an irritant to the cops' true goals; Gavilan, a part-time real-estate agent, is desperately trying to broker a deal between a film producer and a musician, and Calden, a struggling young actor, is eager to be discovered, prepping for a showcase of scenes from
A Streetcar Named Desire
. Add to this duo a psychic talk-radio host (a ravishing, very funny Lena Olin), a Hollywood madam in a stretch limo (Lolita Davidovich), and a literally murderous record producer (Isaiah Washington), and you have a perfect representation of Southern California nutjobs, in which the sleazy, the opportunistic, and the legitimately hopeful effortlessly intertwine.

It's a little disheartening that, for most viewers, the only draw to the picture will be the odd-couple pairing of Harrison Ford and Josh Hartnett, considering that their performances seriously hinder the movie's effectiveness. As he proved in the *Star Wars* and Indiana Jones films (and, to a lesser extent, in Mike Nichols'
Working Girl
), Ford can be an effortlessly sly comedian, but in recent years something stodgy and heavy-spirited has crept into his acting; it's clear that he's not having the fun he used to, and it's a bit painful watching him go through the motions of being "colorful." In
Hollywood Homicide
, Ford seems rather confused by the movie's tone, and, in one of the script's few unfortunate excesses, Shelton and Souza do him no favors with a laborious subplot involving Gavilan's investigation by Internal Affairs (led by an ever-unpleasant Bruce Greenwood). Meanwhile, Hartnett continues to be Hollywood's poster-boy for Youthful Ennui. The actor's natural blankness matches his character's dimness, I guess, but as with his "comedic" turn in
40 Days & 40 Nights
, you can rattle off the names of at least a dozen young actors who could've played his role with far more flair; Hartnett's prettiness is still his only saving grace. (Oddly enough, Ford and Hartnett seem like perfectly appropriate casting decisions for a summertime action comedy until you actually
see

the movie, and realize how good it could have been with the right comic actors in their place.)

Ron Shelton has always been a better writer than director, and he proves it again here with the film's overblown action sequences – including a closing chase scene that just won't end – that don't gel with *Homicide*'s deft comedy; viewers who appreciate the nutty humor will find the explosions and shootings a drag, and anyone expecting routine action fare might find the gags intrusive, and a bit bewildering. (I have a sneaking suspicion that the movie will tank at the box office.) But just as you can sit through *The Matrix Reloaded*'s deadening script to witness the cool visuals, you can make it past the dullness of *Hollywood Homicide*'s presentation for the off-kilter characters and enjoyable dialogue (including perhaps the best satirical line I've ever heard in a cop movie – a deadly-serious Martin Landau to Harrison Ford: "You have 72 hours ... to sell my house."). There's no doubt the movie could've been better, but in a season already overrun with sequels, prequels, and re-makes, a burst of true creativity – especially in such an exhausted genre – is nothing to sniff at.



DUMB & DUMBERER: WHEN HARRY MET LLOYD

Speaking of movies completely devoid of anything resembling originality, what in God's name was the rationale for a *Dumb & Dumber* follow-up that didn't involve Jim Carrey, Jeff Daniels, or the writing-directing Farrelly brothers? Was *anyone* eagerly awaiting this? In *Dumb & Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd*, which takes place when the titular morons first met in high school, Eric Christian Olsen and Derek Richardson pull off impressive-enough approximations of Carrey and Daniels, but since they haven't been given anything remotely amusing to say or do, their performances give you no pleasure whatsoever. Olsen and Richardson obviously worked hard at these impersonations, but the movie is a grim and hopelessly unfunny experience; you just end up feeling badly for them. (And they're not the only ones: The terrific Shia LaBeouf, from *Holes*, is routinely humiliated, and anyone who imagined that the pairing of Eugene Levy and Cheri Oteri would produce even *one*

laugh will be sorely disappointed.) Directed, with absolutely no sense of comic ingenuity, by Troy Miller, the film is proof positive that 80 minutes, in the wrong hands, can feel like an eternity.