

## This "Hulk" Is a Beautiful but Oppressive Bore: Also, "Alex & Emma" and "Bend It Like Beckham"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 24 June 2003 18:00

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**HULK**

There are scenes of sublime directorial craftsmanship and exquisite beauty in the latest Ang Lee film, which should surprise no one familiar with Lee's oeuvre but might shock the masses lining up to see a Summer Blockbuster entitled *Hulk*.

In his screen adaptation of the Marvel comic, wherein mild-mannered scientist Bruce Banner (Eric Bana) routinely turns into a marauding green monster, Lee takes traditional comic-book sequences – the protagonist-as-small-child prelude, Banner acquiring his super-powers, the hero's love interest (Jennifer Connelly) discovering his secret identity – and gives them a haunting, melancholy spin, and his transitional wipes couldn't be improved on; the opening 10 minutes, in particular, are as close to a live-action comic book as anything you're likely to see. Lee's impeccable use of sound and silence is also marvelous – the sequence in which Banner is first exposed to the life-altering gamma rays is all the more shocking for being so *quiet* – and when the Hulk goes on a full-throttle rampage, battling a trio of snarling, mutated dogs or attacking a series of tanks and jet fighters, the swiftness and brute force of his actions are legitimately thrilling. All in all, it might be the best-directed comic-book adaptation you've ever seen, or at least, it would be if the majority of

*Hulk*

wasn't such an unholy drag.

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As we're all aware, the establishing film in any potential comic-book-movie franchise – *Superman the Movie*

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*Batman*

,  
*X-Men*

– is bound to be top-heavy with exposition; to get comic-averse moviegoers caught up on what we fans already know, time must be spent on the characters' origins, the discovery of their powers, the creation of the hero's nemesis, et cetera. This is routinely understood and generally forgiven, especially when said movie –

*Spider-Man*

being a perfect example – makes its before-they-were-heroes sequences thoroughly entertaining in their own right. Yet despite the weird beauty and technical acumen of the presentation, I think it's fair to say that

*Hulk*

's first hour, and much of its second, is mind-numbingly dull. Matters aren't helped by Bana's charisma-free portrayal or Connelly's glassy-eyed sullenness, but a work like this could survive even lesser performances. (Their reticence is countered by the outrageous overacting of Nick Nolte and Josh Lucas.) The problem lies in the film's unremitting humorlessness. Heroic characters in the Marvel universe have always been more tortured, and more poignant, than those under other trademarks, but

*Hulk*

's filmmakers are

so

insistent about its dramatic subtext that they suck all the fun out of the work; you

ache

for a few jokes in this movie, and it's not until the very last line of dialogue that you finally get one.

For many, the film's main joke will be the CGI Hulk himself, but his obviously-computer-animated phoniness didn't bother me that much, mostly because when the green giant was onscreen, in all of his four scenes, at least something was *happening*. (As with *Spider-Man*

, the CGI allows Hulk to be capable of otherworldly abilities you wouldn't witness through any other medium.) But for the most part,

*Hulk*

is so torturously slow and, at 138 minutes, so bloody long that you have far too much time to realize that it doesn't have much of a plot and that you couldn't give a damn about anyone in it. Ang Lee should be commended for giving the project more gravitas than the material might deserve – and I'm saying this is a major fan of Marvel's output – yet it's also far more than it *requires*

. As I've noted repeatedly in the past, I'm all for Summer Blockbusters with emotional heft, but

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### *Hulk*

is so mired in the drama of it all that it feels oppressive; during the course of the movie, it feels as if the titular character is sitting

*on*  
you.



### **ALEX & EMMA**

In Rob Reiner's new romantic comedy, Luke Wilson plays a writer, and I might as well start my criticism right there, because I doubt that any actor in the history of film has seemed *less* like a writer than Luke Wilson in

#### *Alex & Emma*

. Wilson's Alex isn't just a writer, you see, but an *author*

, prone to spouting high-minded blather about "the creative process" and working on a novel set in the roaring '20s, and with Wilson delivering his lines in that carefree, lovable-fratboy manner of his (which made him perfect casting in

#### *Old School*

), everything that comes out his mouth sounds ridiculous; you can't believe this man has ever *heard*

of F. Scott Fitzgerald, let alone decided to ape his style. There's a lot to hate about

#### *Alex & Emma*

– the lack of romantic chemistry, the lack of jokes, the laborious interweaving of the modern-day love saga with the novel Alex is writing (which appears to be the most god-awful piece of rubbish ever to grace a publisher's desk) – and only one thing to like: the comic pluckiness of Kate Hudson. In her scenes as Alex's stenographer, Hudson is hindered by Wilson's miscasting and a character that's an 11th-generation descendant of Meg Ryan's Sally, yet she flair and inventiveness when playing a series of

#### *au pairs*

in the movie's story-within-the-story, displaying a gift for funny accents and outsized characters that the movie doesn't know what to do with. Someone – Wes Anderson, maybe, or Charlie Kaufman – should get to work pronto on a movie, unlike the vapid one-two punch of

#### *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*

and

#### *Alex & Emma*

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, that actually deserves her comic zing.



### ***BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM***

The Brew & View is bound to do heaps of business with *Bend It Like Beckham*, considering that this crowd-pleasing art-house flick is finally making its area debut after some 15 weeks of release, and that makes me feel less guilty for admitting that I didn't much care for it. Like the similarly themed

*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

and

*Real Women Have Curves*

,  
*Beckham*

is about a young ethnic woman torn between traditional family values and her personal goals (which is literal in this case, as the film's Indian-Anglo heroine wants to play professional soccer), and therein lies my rub: I've seen it all before.

*Many times*

before. Though competently shot and performed, it's missing the visual and verbal vivacity that allowed

*Curves*

to transcend its formula, and it's criminally short on surprises or excitement;

*Beckham*

is nice, safe, and pleasant – the perfect film to bring grandma to. Though I can't work up any personal enthusiasm for it, I'll happily acknowledge that there's a large audience out there for works of

*Beckham*

's ilk, so far be it from me to dissuade them from attending; to quote a wittier mind than mine, if you like this sort of thing, this is the sort of thing you'll like.