

## Smith Can't Rescue "Bad Boys II": Also, "How to Deal" and "Johnny English"

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 22 July 2003 18:00

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### ***BAD BOYS II***

Near the climax of *Bad Boys II*, Detective Mike Lowrey (Will Smith), leading a high-speed chase involving dope-runners and the Cuban military, turns to his car's passengers and barks, "Everybody start shooting somebody!" One can imagine the same command being issued from the mouths of director Michael Bay and producer Jerry Bruckheimer.

Summa cum laude graduates of the shoot-first-and-don't-even-*bother*-asking-questions school of filmmaking, Mr. Bay and Mr. Bruckheimer, working as a team, have managed to deliver some of the most spectacularly witless movies of the past decade, where nothing matters except the creation of bigger and more outlandish chases, gunshots, and explosions; the point of their bombastic *oeuvre*, it would seem, is to make you long for the nuance and subtlety of Joel Schumacher or McG. (Bruckheimer also served as producer for the hugely entertaining *Pirates of the Caribbean*, so at least he got 10 whole days of respectability before this new opus debuted.)

*Bad Boys*

,  
*The Rock*

,  
*Armageddon*

,  
*Pearl Harbor*

, now

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### *Bad Boys II*

... is it possible that each movie is successively louder than the last because Bay's and Bruckheimer's talents have caused them to go deaf?

### *Bad Boys II*

is a continual assault on your senses, and at 145 minutes, an incredibly *long*

assault; the movie isn't as downright embarrassing as

### *Armageddon*

or

### *Pearl Harbor*

(there's no weeping Affleck in sight), but excepting a rare moment of Will Smith levity, it's a painful experience – an overlong and underplotted venture than feels like a relic from the mid-'80s. Watch it gross \$200 million.

For anyone wondering about the story, it involves bad-boy detectives Lowrey and Marcus Burnette (Martin Lawrence) attempting to arrest (i.e.: blast the hell out of) more Miami druglords, and the film's one nod to cleverness lies in the manner in which the drugs are being smuggled – inside the hollowed-out corpses of area John Does. This leads to much "comedy" involving severed body parts, allowing the film to veer from its traditional menu of cars and guns and become a \$100-million episode of *Six Feet Under*. Add screeching, tiresome banter between the leads and Gabrielle Union wasted as Smith's love interest, and that's the whole kit and kaboodle; judging by the roars of approval at the screening I attended, Bay, Bruckheimer, and company are giving the film's audience exactly what they want. Again. Yet you don't have to be all that sensitive to be offended by the film's rampant misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia, just as you don't have to be a film scholar to realize that Bay's direction isn't so much kinetic as it is frenzied; Bay won't let his camera sit still for three seconds.

Blessedly, Will Smith is on hand to lighten the movie's very heavy load. Committed and uber-confident, he's the only actor onscreen who seems the slightest bit connected to the material, and he even gets laughs out of the film's most potentially ugly scene, in which Lowrey and Burnette taunt and terrify a sweet-faced 15-year-old kid. Smith actually manages to give a *performance*

in this piece of piffle, and the sweat stains never show; Lawrence, on the other hand, does nothing

*but*

sweat, and his histrionic apoplexy is as headache-inducing as any number of Bay's explosions. (You're never more on Smith's side than when he's screaming at his partner to "Shut the f—k up!") Yet I know in my bones that Lawrence's gruesome mugging is exactly what the filmmakers were aiming for; as we've learned from their previous enterprises, as we learn from

### *Bad Boys II*

, and as we're sure to re-learn in the future, for Bay and Bruckheimer there's no success quite like excess.



## **HOW TO DEAL**

Devotees of TV's *The West Wing* – admittedly, and sadly, a dying breed – have had to make peace with NBC pulling the show from its summer-rerun roster this year, so it's sort of a sick little joke that the only way we fans are able to get a *West Wing* fix

these days is by going to see a Mandy Moore movie. No, the pop princess hasn't made any appearances on the show, but in her latest cinematic endeavor, *How to Deal*, Moore's mom is played by the incomparable Allison Janney, and Moore's boyfriend is played by Trent Ford, who portrays the slimy French-lothario boyfriend of the president's daughter; the chance to see these performers again was reason enough for me to catch the flick, even though I had successfully avoided Moore in last year's tearjerker hit

*A Walk to Remember*

. Imagine my surprise: The movie's kinda sweet. Terribly directed and ridiculously plotted, yes, but kinda sweet.

A coming-of-age tale wherein Moore's teen falls in love with Ford's dashing charmer while coping with (deep breath) her parents' divorce, her dad's re-marriage, her mother's new beau, her sister's impending wedding, a friend's death, a friend's pregnancy, a car crash, and a stoned grandmother, *How to Deal* is like the entire young-adult section of the library shoved in a blender and set on liquefy; the movie is a gooey mess, but damn it all, it's

*sincere*

, and in a period of soulless, mind-numbing exercises disguised as entertainment, sincerity ought not to be mocked. (Well, okay, it can be mocked a little – I let out an audible laugh when Ford's character, speaking at his best friend's funeral, said of the dead teen, "He taught me how to love." Not that there's anything wrong with that ... .) Allison Janney, as expected, is absolutely marvelous, giving the movie true depth and much-needed comic texture, and as for Moore, she might not yet possess much in the way of acting ability, but she's charming, and only a couple of steps away from appearing natural. I can't exactly see myself watching a lot of her future work – hey, I skipped Britney Spears in

*Crossroads*

, too – but if, as with

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### *How to Deal*

, I get suckered into it for fringe reasons, it probably won't cause me much grief.



### **JOHNNY ENGLISH**

Rowan Atkinson's dryness is a thing of comic beauty, and he has a few scenes in the spy spoof *Johnny English*

when his exquisite slow burns fill you with unfettered happiness. Too bad they're so infrequent.

Most of

*Johnny English*

is C-level James Bond parody, filled with obvious and toothless gags that would seem antiquated even if our psyches

*weren't*

already infiltrated with images of Mike Myers in Austin Powers drag. In addition to Atkinson, the cast members do what they can with the tepid jokes – Ben Miller is endearing as a Guy Friday, and John Malkovich does one of his so-unbelievably-awful-it's-actually-pretty-wonderful accents (French, this time) – but the movie remains lethargic and mostly uninspired. I use the term “mostly” because it actually

*is*

inspired ... by Atkinson's Johnny English character from in a series of British TV commercials.

I'm guessing that 30 seconds is the ideal format for this idea.