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## **WHALE RIDER**

Among its many, many virtues, what I loved most about Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* is its toughness. In the past year, we've seen so many variants on the ethnic-female-overcoming-her-family's-prejudices theme – *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Real Women Have Curves*, *Bend It Like Beckham* – that the idea of sitting through another one, even one set on a staggeringly gorgeous New Zealand seaside, filled me with more ennui than expectation.

I stand not only corrected but humbled: *Whale Rider* is an astonishing experience, funnier and sadder and *truer* than we had any right to hope for, and so honest a depiction of its world and its inhabitants that even events that could pass as Hollywood Clichés feel startlingly fresh. Living in a modern-day Maori village, 12-year-old Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is the last descendent of the community's chief, her grandfather Koro (Rawiri Paratene), and would be the new, natural leader were she not a girl. While Koro attempts to find a young male to take her place, Pai trains for the leadership role on her own, hoping to eventually win her grandfather's, and the townspeople's, approval.

Not since Anna Paquin (coincidentally, another New Zealander) in *The Piano* have I seen a child performance as breathtakingly sincere as Keisha Castle-Hughes' in *Whale Rider*

. She has a scene in which she delivers a school report on her grandfather that leaves the

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 09 September 2003 18:00

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audience (including this viewer) weeping, but all throughout Ms. Castle-Hughes is touching, fearless, and absolutely unmannered; credit certainly goes to her director, but this young performer already has the makings of a major actress. She's matched by the sterling work of the film's ensemble cast, with special mention going to Cliff Curtis as Pai's father, but writer/director Caro could have populated the work with even lesser actors and borne something of a miracle. She lingers on

*Whale Rider*

's themes of tradition and empowerment but neither exploits nor simplifies them, and she has a hell of an eye; the film's final 15 minutes rival anything in

*Winged Migration*

for sheer dramatic beauty. And somehow, Caro has pulled off a visually resplendent meditation on life that's audience-friendly to boot; the laughs and lump-in-the-throat moments come effortlessly and without a sense of pandering, and Caro's strong, simple storytelling makes you eager to see how the film will resolve itself. (There are more surprises than you might expect.)

*Whale Rider*

is, unquestionably, one of 2003's finest offerings, disarmingly moving and completely enjoyable.



## **JEEPERS CREEPERS 2**

I don't walk into modern horror movies, let alone horror *sequels*, with high expectations, which is probably why I have a greater tolerance for them than most; give me a few good scares and some cleverly executed staging and I'm happy.

*Jeepers Creepers 2*

, on the whole, kept me pretty satisfied.

*Pretty*

satisfied, mind you – this sequel to 2001's body-eating-winged-monster flick is chockablock with paper-thin characters who constantly makes the stupidest moves imaginable, and the movie's bizarre editing often results in incoherence, with the fates of about a half-dozen potential victims left dangling and early plotlines unaccountably ignored. (Most of these subplots, by the by, involve

*Creepers*

' busload of teenage basketball players trying to determine which of their fellow teammates is gay, and these interrogations usually occur while said teens are shirtless and/or urinating beside one another – the movie's rampant homoeroticism might be more disturbing to its core

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audience than any number of beheadings.)

Yet despite the film's faults, director Victor Salva pulls off numerous chilling moments, and though nothing in this sequel matches the giggly paranoia of the original *Creepers'* opening half-hour, Salva mixes shudders with guffaws effectively. There's a sensational opening set in a golden-hued cornfield, a tickling throwaway where The Creeper, out of nowhere, lands on the team's coach and just as quickly vanishes with him (the genius of the slaying is in the way it's framed, as blurry background to the squabbling teens in the foreground), and

*Twin Peaks*

fans will rejoice at every shot featuring steely-eyed Ray Wise in Leland-Palmer-as-Killer-Bob mode. Best of all is the moment when The Creeper, dangling upside-down, stares at the busload of kids and selects his dinner menu; Salva sustains his shot of the creature so beautifully that, while you initially laugh at the monster-movie latex, you end up thinking you've never seen anything quite so creepy. It's all nonsense, of course, but

*Jeepers Creepers 2*

is surprisingly scary, and about 10 times more fun than the likes of *Freddy Vs. Jason*



**DICKIE ROBERTS: FORMER CHILD STAR**

*Dickie Roberts: Former Child Star* blows its comic wad way too early – in the first 10 minutes, actually. Opening with an inspired parody of *The E!* *Hollywood True Story*

, Sam Weisman's comedy introduces us to Dickie (David Spade), a onetime sitcom fixture whose post-stardom decline has led to a celebrity-boxing match against Emmanuel Lewis. Hoping to resuscitate his career, he attempts to land the lead in a new Rob Reiner film – which, considering Reiner's post-

*The American President*

output, is barely a step above celebrity boxing – but Reiner insists that the role calls for someone who can honestly recall life as a child (the movie in question sounds like a gruesome hybrid of

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*It's a Wonderful Life*

and

*Field of Dreams*

), and Dickie just isn't "real" enough. Dickie's solution? He hires a family to temporarily adopt him so he can experience the life of a normal suburban boy.

Until this asinine plot kicks into gear, *Dickie Roberts* isn't terrible. There are a few nearly inspired Hollywood potshots, and the sight of Dickie playing poker with actual former child stars such as Barry Williams, Corey Feldman, and Leif Garrett provides an amusing burst of Schadenfreude. But all goodwill vanishes once Spade joins his simulated family and is required to Find His Heart, because, to put it bluntly, David Spade

*has*

no heart. Neutering his naturally caustic, narcissistic persona robs Spade of his only comic weaponry, and watching him go through the motions of bettering himself and mentoring his new siblings is a grisly experience. In addition to forcing Spade to play nice, the movie makes the fatal mistake of having Dickie fall for his "mom" (the ever-lovely Mary McCormack), and no comic actor alive is less believable as a romantic lead. (Spade's most viable onscreen love interest would be a mirror.)

*Dickie Roberts*

goes from moderately smart to insipid to just plain icky in record time, and the thought of David Spade making moves on Mary McCormack is more terrifying than anything you'll find in *Jeepers Creepers 2*

(Note: Word has it that, during the end credits, audiences are treated to a group sing-a-long involving former sitcom stars. I didn't stick around for it. Here's a rule of thumb for sitting through a movie's "credit cookies" – If you didn't laugh during a movie's first 95 minutes, nothing will make you laugh in the last three.)