

"Bad Santa" a Salty Holiday Treat: Also, "Dr. Seuss' The Cat in the Hat" and "Gothika"

Written by Mike Schulz

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BAD SANTA

You might find yourself fearing the worst in the opening reel of Terry Zwigoff's *Bad Santa*.

We're introduced to Willie Soke (Billy Bob Thornton), easily the most repellant department-store Santa the world has ever known, as he drowns his sorrows in a local tavern. In short order, we learn that Willie (a) is a hopeless, irredeemable drunk, (b) can't get through one sentence without saying a certain expletive, (c) has a predilection for trysts with heavysset customers in department-store dressing rooms, and d) *loathes* children. Willie finds annual work because he teams with a diminutive partner (Tony Cox) who acts as Santa's personal elf – no store owner wants to risk firing an African-American dwarf – but the gig is just a ruse, allowing the duo to rob a new department store every Christmas Eve. For the film's first 20 minutes, this joke is spread so thin that you can't imagine the movie recovering; by the end of the opening credits the film is already trying your patience. "I get

it," you mutter as you watch Willie vomiting in his red suit. "He's a

bad Santa

."

And then the damndest thing happens: The movie becomes funny. Really funny. Tears-falling-down-your-cheeks funny. Willie encounters a needy, overweight pre-teen (Brett Kelly) who truly believes that Willie is Santa Claus and refuses to leave him alone; the grumpy

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drunk becomes this kid's unintentional mentor, and the movie takes off into a whole new comic universe. No matter what vile, revolting thing Willie says or does, the kid looks at him with understanding and an impenetrable deadpan, and the film's comedy comes from waiting to see if this bizarre little kid will finally make Willie crack. (As with the kidnapped toddler in *Raising Arizona*

, Kelly's character is so contentedly clueless that it doesn't pain you when horrific actions take place all around him.) In many ways, the movie is a shambles – it requires an almost feverish suspension of disbelief and a lot of its plot developments, such as Willie's aborted suicide attempt, come out of nowhere – yet it's profanely, almost shockingly hilarious; it takes gags I've seen dozens of times before, such as Cox's argument over splitting the loot with Bernie Mac's crooked store detective, and twists them so uniquely that it's like watching them for the very first time. As he proved in 2001's wonderful

Ghost World

, Zwigoff is marvelous with fringe characters –

Bad Santa

also features Lauren Graham as a sweetly libidinous bartender, Lauren Tom as Cox's shrewishly venal girlfriend, and the late John Ritter, in one of his most inspired performances, as a nebbishy store manager – and the banter between the sublime Thornton and Kelly is astonishingly well-directed; at one point, their conversation reached such a level of Dadaist oddity that my brother and I nearly fell out of our theatre seats laughing. Best of all, the movie plays with the conventions of Hollywood comedies in thoroughly satisfying ways: If you spend the movie waiting for Willie to become A Better Person, you'll be waiting in vain; he's a hateful rat bastard who eventually becomes a slightly less

hateful rat bastard. For those who like their laughs more salty than sweet,

Bad Santa

, flaws and all, turns out to be a true holiday gift.



DR. SEUSS' THE CAT IN THE HAT

Bad Santa's polar opposite is *Dr. Seuss' The Cat in the Hat*, a movie of such unimaginable awfulness that it's a little overwhelming; I would say that its badness had to be seen to be believed, but that would imply that people should

see it. (Unfortunately, based on the opening-weekend box-office take, it's too late for many of

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you.) Allow me to describe, in full, the plot: The Cat makes a house all messy. Then he cleans it. The End. Though this wondrous storyline has all the succinct clarity of a Harold Pinter drama, it's still a wee bit thin for a feature film, so our time is spent witnessing an overbearing Mike Myers fail in his every attempt at humor (his performance is a true oxymoron – hyperactively lazy), seeing Alec Baldwin, Sean Hayes, and Kelly Preston humiliate themselves, watching young Dakota Fanning and Spencer Breslin look like they want to

murder

their agents, and shrinking from the gruesomely Seuss-ish art direction; the movie feels like an acid-trip in a Crayola box.

The Cat in the Hat

is 80 minutes long, but I swear to God I lost three years of my life watching it.



GOTHIKA

Halle Berry is a rarity among gorgeous performers: She only seems truly happy when looking like hell. When cast as eye-candy in *Swordfish* or the *X-Men* films, Berry's uncomfortable line readings and vaguely distracted air make her seem amateurish; she appears both annoyed and resigned that she has little to do but look good, and, in turn, gives her roles nothing beyond surface appeal. Yet when she attacks meatier material – in

Monster's Ball

, of course, but also in

Jungle Fever

and parts of

Losing Isaiah

– the intensity she emits has a real theatrical charge; jazzed by the opportunity to

act

, Berry in out-of-control mode is a sight to see. In the ludicrous, hysterical, but not unenjoyable psycho-thriller

Gothika

, we get both Berrys for the price of one. She plays Miranda Grey, a brilliant psychiatrist in a mental institution that would give

Marat/Sade

's Peter Weiss the willies. Driving home one rainy night, she nearly hits a young woman in the road, and after the girl bursts into flames – ah,

that

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old chestnut – Grey wakes up three days later in her own hospital, imprisoned for butchering her husband on that fateful evening. The rest of

Gothika

concerns Grey's attempts to escape the hospital and prove her sanity, but to be honest, I was having so much fun watching Berry play I'm-not-crazy craziness that I didn't necessarily *want*

her to escape.

Every few months one of these egregiously lurid horror flicks hits our cineplexes, and most of them fail miserably because the casts and filmmakers can't separate the titillating from the ridiculous; aiming for High Seriousness, movies like *The Cell* and *Stigmata* and *The Order* are lucky to achieve campiness. But, in a nice change, those behind

Gothika

appear to know that it's

all

ridiculous. (Any world where Robert Downey Jr. plays the sanest person onscreen is not a world to be trusted.) From the cast of drooling inmates to the Utopian swimming pool to the deliriously nutso denouement, you can't believe a single frame of Mathieu Kossovitz's movie, yet it has a fine cast (Charles S. Dutton, John Carroll Lynch, Bernard Hill, Dorian Harewood), a creepy ambience, strong momentum, and, of course, Halle Berry. Stick with her through the forced jocularity of her opening scenes and you'll be treated to the always-welcome sight of Halle Unhinged, which is almost reason enough to visit the gloriously schlocky

Gothika

.