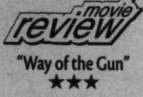


'Way of the Gun' Saves Snoozefest With Surprises

By JUSTIN WINTERS
Staff Writer

With its main characters chatting about cards and religion, getting caught up in bloody gunfights and C-sections and donating bodily fluids for money, the offbeat and unique "Way of the Gun" has something for every desensitized viewer.



It's too bad about the film's schizophrenic story and stop-start pacing. These elements alone drag down a remarkably accomplished cast in the unfortunate end.

Taking a page from his twist-filled, too-smart-for-its-own-good "Usual Suspects," screenwriter Christopher

McQuarrie goes for broke by directing his own story about two criminals who have found their next, and hopefully final, score - kidnapping a young woman carrying the baby of a very wealthy, influential and dangerous couple.

Of course, the two bumbling cons, played admirably by Ryan Phillippe ("Cruel Intentions") and Benicio Del Toro ("Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas"), end up getting in way over their heads. Soon the duo are chased by some unfriendly guys, including James Caan ("Mickey Blue Eyes") and Taye Diggs ("Go").

What sets apart "Gun" from virtually all not-so-smart crime flicks thus far this year is its ceaseless willingness to surprise. Its perfect opening scene sets the film up for fun with a skewed

barfight. And the picture's bloody conclusion rings more like a showdown from "True Grit." The film's main car chase - usually a high-speed action staple - ends up being very slow as the good guys outwit the bad guys in the strangest manner.

In short, expect the unexpected from this movie. To put it best, one inquisitive character asks Del Toro who the smart one of the pair is, and he replies, "I don't think this is a brains type of operation."

The middle portion of "Gun," which provides much of the exposition, also holds most of the picture's problems. The film's ultra-dark tone, combined with its attempts to set up a multi-layered story with double and triple crosses, ends up slowing the film to a snoozing halt.

Luckily, naptime is interrupted every time Del Toro or Caan grace the screen. Their first scene together, a conversation about crime over coffee, simply oozes cool - both men are character actors at opposite ends of their successful careers. On the other hand, Diggs and the still-annoying Juliette Lewis ("From Dusk Till Dawn"), look happy just to have work.

Although McQuarrie ends up batting average on his first directing job, the film's conclusion gives hope that he has a witty full-out western movie in the works. Guns blaze, no loose ends are left dangling, and the film is tied up into a remarkably nice - while not that neat - package.

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Chinese 'Shower' Refreshes With Quietness, Simplicity

By ALLISON ROST
Staff Writer

In China, visiting the bathhouse is one of those old traditions slowly being ushered out by the new economy.

There's nothing racy about it. It's just a bunch of older men relaxing in the bath, getting massages and watching crickets fight.

This disappearing phenomenon is examined in "The Shower," a Chinese film that has already passed through the festival circuit and picked up several awards.

Da Ming, a businessman, returns home to Beijing when he suspects his bathhouse-owning father has died.

Instead, his father is just fine. He's working hard at pleasing his customers and taking care of Da Ming's retarded brother, Er Ming. And everything there is just the same: the same men come to the bathhouse every day, the houses look just as they did decades earlier.

But when the bathhouse's existence is threatened by the expanding city and his father's ill health, decisions must be made about who is going to take care of Er Ming as well as the extensive customer base that now has nowhere else to go.

It's a simple, no-frills story, but it's funny and touching in its own way. Er Ming provides a lot of comic relief, and his childlike wonderment at things like singing in the shower is delightful.

Actor Jiang Wu does a fabulous job as Er Ming. He's entirely believable as this child in a grown-up body with all of his emotions. He is the true star of the film.

The film's only flaw is a random flashback scene. As Da Ming's father is telling a story, the scene changes to the Chinese countryside with no explanation of who or what the audience is seeing.

Things are halfway explained later on, but with no context for the scene, it just feels out of place, and the movie would be better had it been left out entirely.

Otherwise, the quiet simplicity of the film is truly refreshing, a respite from the classic adrenaline-pumping movies of the summer.

But what ties everything together is this prevailing sense that the old is better than the new. In the film's world where a shower is regarded as something newfangled, it's suggested that maybe what we all need is just a good soak in the tub.

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Don't Waste Time Watching Corny, Predictable 'Watcher'

By SHINDY CHEN
Staff Writer

Ugh. This horribly wack, slow, corny, predictable piece of crap will make you want to leave the theater and go home to watch infomercials. It will also make you wonder how films like this got their budgets when "Scary Movie" worked on a measly \$19 million.



There is absolutely no reason to see "The Watcher" unless you have some Keanu Reeves infatuation, but even then, his acting is lamer than usual, and yes, subtle hints of Ted still manage to leak into Reeves' character despite the 20-odd films he's made since his Hollywood debut.

Reeves plays a nameless, disturbed serial killer who follows FBI agent Joel Campbell (James Spader) to the Windy City from Los Angeles, where his track record included the murders of many young, single women by strangling them with piano wire.

The killer maintains his occupation despite the change of scenery, so it's not long before Reeves starts haunting Campbell with death threats against

new victims. He does this by sending photographs of women he intends to kill, giving the police and the entire city a specific amount of time to locate her before he gets medieval on her ass.

That's all there is to the plot, yet director Joe Charbanic tries to get in some sort of subplot involving Campbell's ex-girlfriend, who was one of Reeves' previous victims. Or not. At this point the film gets so muddy and confusing that playing with the cool, twisty Pepsi cup from concessions is more interesting.

Charbanic also tries some camera ingenuity by mixing realistic, video camera-esque elements (recall Vinterberg's "Celebration" or "The Blair Witch Project") juxtaposed with the otherwise normal-looking parts of the film.

This technique, borrowed from the European Dogma 95 film school, is useful in forming the killer's perspective, but is so unpolished and pointless that it serves no dramatic purpose and gets no bonus points for effort.

From the weak storyline, spotted here and there with lame jokes, Spader's fatigued, migraine-cursed cop character is really the most memorable element.

But even he gets a little too dramatic at times.

There's also an action sequence toward the film's conclusion, which has lots of exciting fire and explosions.

As for Marisa Tomei, what the hell was she doing in this film - besides making a dent in her career? Her character - the sweet, pretty psychologist - could have been played by anyone, and

the disheveled, under-eye-circles look just isn't working out.

Consider yourself warned. "The Watcher" is not scary, suspenseful or gory. It was a complete waste of two hours of my life, but at least I got a cool Pepsi cup out of it.

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Zellweger Charms in LaBute's Heartwarming 'Nurse Betty'

By JEREMY HURTZ
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

It's official: Renée Zellweger has inherited Meg Ryan's Quintessentially Cute/Sexy/Naive Character crown. She proves her charm again in the title role in "Nurse Betty," an equally charming comedy with a violent noir underbelly.

Betty's a diner waitress who obsesses over the hospital-based soap opera "A Reason to Love" as an escape from her life with her philandering husband (Aaron Eckhart). When Betty witnesses hubby's murder at the hands of two hired killers (Morgan Freeman and Chris Rock) over a stolen drug cache, she blocks the trauma in a fascinating way.



Believing herself to be a character from her beloved program, Betty embarks on a road trip from Kansas to Los Angeles. She's seeking the love of the soap's lead doctor (Greg Kinnear) - not the actor but his character, who she thinks is real. Of course, Betty unwittingly brings the stolen drugs along, and the hitmen follow.

Crafted in the tradition of the Coens' "Fargo" and "Blood Simple," "Betty" showcases the best in social commentary, screwy characters and smart dialogue. These blend seamlessly, creating a heartwarming film that still has serious things to say. That's rare.

Also uncommon is the honest sensibility of the plot's unforeseeable twists. When Betty finally catches up to the actor who plays her dream doc, their conversation is totally surprising - yet in no way contrived.

The characters also endear themselves in a straightforward manner, thanks to the principal cast's inspired portrayals. We often have seen too-too witty rapport between hitman duos, but Freeman and Rock make the mold fresh with a genuine father-son dynamic.

It's tough to imagine any modern actress but Zellweger in the lead role. Her usual gee-ain't-I-cute schtick maintains a true edge.

"Betty" is director Neil LaBute's third film. It's a blunt departure from "In the Company of Men" and "Your Friends and Neighbors," two of the most bleakly cynical pictures ever made.

LaBute didn't write this film, and its on-the-road plot forces him to shed his usually stazy style. It's also downright hopeful - a surprise along the same lines as David Lynch's "The Straight Story" or David Mamet's "The Winslow Boy."

America's darkest directors are looking on the bright side of life, it seems. After popping the high-quality happy pill administered by the final moments of "Nurse Betty," that change is difficult to lament.

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