

# Li, DMX Bury Deep Substance in Favor of Fights in 'Cradle'

By PHILIP MCFEE  
Staff Writer

"The Hours." "Nicholas Nickleby." Films like these were evidence of a sinister Hollywood plot to bring substance back to the big screen.

But action-lovers and plot-haters, fear no longer, for a remedy has arrived: "Cradle 2 the Grave." The newest film from director Andrzej Bartkowiak, whose other projects have included "Exit Wounds" and "Romeo Must Die" – or, essentially, DMX's acting career – "Cradle 2 the Grave" takes plot 2 the grave in favor of heavy action.

Diverging from the typical professional thief-and-idiot-cop-buddy movie formula, the movie pairs an untouchable thief (rapper DMX) with another equally untouchable cop (Jet Li).

The roles seem tailor-made for the actors. Li plays a fast-kicking intelligence agent whose lines are rarely more complex than, "You wish."

DMX plays a profanity-spewing, violent character, who, along with Li, searches for mysterious black stones that could bring about the end of the world.

The rest of the cast is filled out by a stripteasing Gabrielle Union, an insufferable Tom Arnold and Anthony Anderson – who didn't pick the best movie to be his rebound from "Kangaroo Jack."

So, the plot's not great. But it's an action movie, and rarely do 3 minutes go by without at least one punch being thrown, which usually explode into all-out brawls. Which means that moviegoers who have seen the trailer will be getting exactly what they expected – lots of violence, none of the sappy pretenses.

One of the movie's only sensitive

scenes artfully segues into a prison sequence with heavy backbeats as a soundtrack.

Classy. And, as action movies go, "Cradle 2 the Grave" delivers more action than any movie to come to theaters in recent months, if little else.

In "Romeo Must Die" Li defeats nearly a dozen enemies by himself.

In "Kiss of the Dragon" – 20. In a single scene in "Cradle 2 the Grave," he dispatches more than three dozen solo.

If the trend continues, look for him next year as Napoleon, single-handedly taking on the entire Russian army in "March 2 Moscow."

"Cradle 2 the Grave" uses almost every type of generic or proven formula for the chase-and-fight scene in less than 2 hours – thankfully not taking any longer. The movie is terrible but terribly exciting.

The end deserves special notice – it involves tanks, helicopters, planes and four separate fight scenes.

One features an objectifying girl-on-girl skirmish that has enough cleavage and flying stilettos to pass for a beer commercial.

In another, Li challenges his opponent in a flaming ring. The fight ends with a death scene so outlandish one almost expects to hear "Fatality!" at the end.

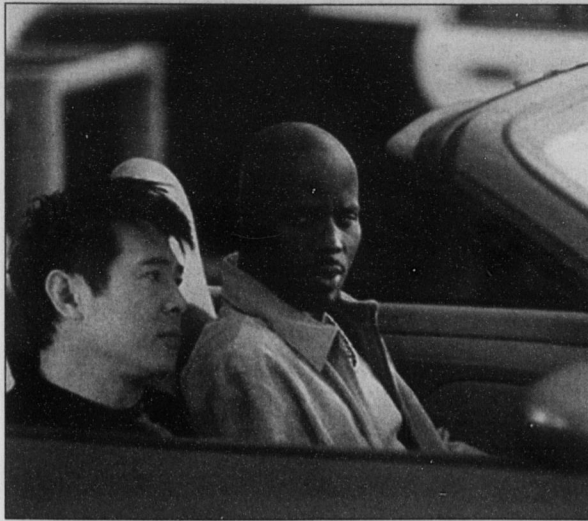


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Martial arts master Jet Li and hardened rapper DMX battle to save the world in the action-packed and entertaining "Cradle 2 The Grave."

The movie definitely won't win any awards – but it does make cinema history.

It's quite possibly the first time Jet Li has ever – ever – been knocked down in a fight.

Although "Cradle 2 the Grave" won't stimulate viewers' intellects, it certainly won't put them 2 sleep.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

# Spacey Fits In as Cursed 'David Gale'

Disturbing images, characters blend

By MICHELLE JARBOE  
Staff Writer

Kevin Spacey has perfected his portrayal of dry, direct and most often insane characters – and "The Life of David Gale" proves typecasting isn't necessarily negative.

The most recent in a line of strange men Spacey has played, Dr. David Gale – philosophy teacher, death penalty opponent, alcoholic and suspected murderer – marks little departure from the actor's past roles.

Like Lester Burnham of 1999's "American Beauty," Gale experiences a downward spiral tending toward madness. But unlike Burnham's story, Gale's life is one we experience through his own words and memories.

Gale is on death row, ironically, for the murder of his partner in anti-death penalty efforts. He tells all to ambitious reporter Elizabeth "Bitsey" Bloom (Kate Winslet) in three 2-hour interviews.

The young female journalist and the convicted murderer seem to team up to prove Gale's innocence. But there's much more to the twisted story than meets the eye.

Winslet takes on the role of the respected and objective reporter with aplomb, but it's Bitsey's emotional roller coaster that best displays the actress's abilities.

Although it's difficult to take anyone named Bitsey seriously, and though the character throws away ethics and journalistic distance early in the story, Winslet takes to new levels a part that could have been insipid.

Spacey, meanwhile, falls back on the demeanor he made so familiar in films such as "American Beauty" and "Se7en." One comes to realize Gale has a duality of character, with one personality being the emotionless interviewee with the bland face and the other being the helpless, hapless near-genius whose life took a nose dive without his assistance.

The allure of the story is that neither perception is quite true, and Gale becomes even more multifaceted during the film's resolution.

So does Constance Hallaway (Laura Linney), the murder victim.

Linney captures the quiet devotion and martyrdom of Hallaway and helps to show the deep bond between her character and Gale – a focal element of the story.

Unfortunately, as the movie draws to a close, the plot strings – so tightly gathered at the start and held throughout – begin to fray slightly.

A few of the closing scenes and events seem out of place and remain unexplained in a way that serves merely to remove the viewer at a crucial point.

The occasionally graphic nature of the film also takes its toll between a graphic and violent sex scene and the elaborately accessorized death of a naked woman, Gale's alleged victim.

But disturbing images and minor slip-ups aside, "The Life of David Gale" boasts a fairly unpredictable plot and a skilled cast of characters who live up to their past work.

And for fans of Spacey, it's practicality a must-see.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

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