

INTRODUCTION

BAD MOVIE BINGO

It's just about to hit midnight on New Year's Eve and my pulse is pounding because the ball is about to drop. I'm not in Times Square, watching the big orb descend, surrounded by a million screaming New Yorkers. I'm in my living room in Sydney, cranking a toy bingo machine, while my better half, Clare, and a few close friends count down the last seconds of the year. "Ten! Nine! Eight! . . ."

I catch their bemused glances. I know it's ridiculous, being this excited . . . about little white numbered spheres. Then again, the rattling cage of balls *is* going to decide how I spend the next twelve months. It's a common notion—what you do on New Year's Eve is what'll you do for the following year—but for once it's true. For the next 365 days I'm going to watch one bad film a day to discover what is the worst movie ever made—and I'll view the schlock in the order dictated by the bingo machine. "Seven! Six! . . ."

I've joined in the countdown chant now, keenly aware that

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part of my challenge is to *not* let my newfound obsession take over my life and relationships—at least, not completely. “Five! Four! . . .” That said, a little ball’s in the scoop and is about to drop into the tray! My number’s nearly up. “Three! Two! . . .”

One—one month, that’s how far I need to rewind to explain how this madness started.

It was December 1, a Friday, just after lunch at the Sydney office of *Empire*, the world’s leading movie magazine. In the line of duty as reviews editor, I’d just watched *Material Girls*. For those who’ve not had the displeasure, it’s an egregious wannabe comedy starring pop-music moppets Hilary and Haylie Duff as cosmetic heiresses who fall on hard times and are forced to suffer hideous indignities—like, you know, mingling with minorities and using public transport. Ninety-seven eye-gouging minutes later, I steamed back to my desk, ready to vent in my review.

But even fulmination needs fact-checking—you’ve got to spell the names right when you sully them—so I pulled up the *Material Girls* page on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the world’s most-visited film reference site. What I saw took the vim out of my venom. At that moment, with an average rating of 1.7 out of 10, the Duff sisters’ flick occupied the number 1 spot—*bottom ranking*—on the IMDb’s user-voted chart of the one hundred worst movies *ever* made.

Don’t get me wrong. *Material Girls* had been an affront to everything right and decent in our world. The script was originally a vehicle for the Olsen twins—and *they* turned it down. But seeing it at number 1 on this chart made it seem like an underdog. Was it bad? Sure! Terrible? You betcha! The *worst* movie *ever*? Not a chance.

In my decades as a cinephile and years as a critic, I’d risked retinal burnout on far more heinous crimes against cinema. *Material Girls* wasn’t a patch on Hulk Hogan’s yuletide

yawnfest *Santa with Muscles*. Or on Adam Sandler's beyond-moronic *Going Overboard*, Mariah Carey's entirely without luster *Glitter*, or the all-thumbs video-game adaptations *House of the Dead* and *Alone in the Dark* from German director Uwe Boll.

Looking down the IMDb's Bottom 100 list, I knew it was unlikely that the Duffs' far-from-right stuff could really be lamer than legendary crapfests I'd never gotten around to seeing, cult atrocities like *Manos: The Hands of Fate* and *The Beast of Yucca Flats*, or more recent film flatulence, such as *Leonard Part 6* and *It's Pat*. For that matter, where was *Plan 9 from Outer Space* on the chart? Ed Wood's legendary howler—by default “the worst movie ever made” since pronounced such in Harry and Michael Medved's 1980 book *The Golden Turkey Awards*—wasn't in the Bottom 100 at all.

That night—with Clare having a girls' night out and our fourteen-month-old daughter, Ava, tucked up in her crib—I'd planned to polish a sci-fi screenplay I'd written. But rather than buff the pages that'd land me that elusive seven-figure sale, I sat with a few beers, unable to shake the question: What *really* is the worst movie ever made?

When it comes to great films there's no shortage of “best” announcements, from the annual critics' top ten lists and the Golden Globes, Oscars, and BAFTAs that follow through to more permanent pantheons decreed by the American and British Film Institutes and publications like *Sight & Sound*, *Film Comment*, and *Empire*. But the other end of the cinematic scale doesn't get nearly as much attention.

It ought to, I thought, as I cracked open another brew. If only because truly, madly, and deeply bad movies are, in their own way, as rare as the works of genius bestowed on us by Kurosawa, Hitchcock, Renoir, Scorsese, and Spielberg. The more I pondered the question, the more it seemed possible that

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one poor fool, working methodically and passionately over a set time and using the same criteria, might be able to decide whether *Evil Brain from Outer Space* was more mindless than *Baby Geniuses*, whether *Invasion of the Neptune Men* was a scarier sigh-fi monstrosity than scientology-fi fest *Battlefield Earth*. Such a movie martyr might suffer to know definitively what deserved a lower mark out of not ten but one hundred, *Plan 9* or *Another 9 ½ Weeks*? Eventually, enough “compare and contrast” might make it feasible for that cine-idiot to decide the worst movie ever made.

No prizes for guessing who I considered for this mission. *Material Girls* had sparked the fire and the beers weren't putting it out. There was no escaping that I *wanted* to do this. But was I the man for the job?

That I wasn't a cultist, I reasoned, was in my favor. I had no desire to convince myself or anyone else that a Z-grade 1960s biker flick was the ne plus ultra of undiluted rebel cinema or that a 1990s straight-to-video slasher was actually a cunning social critique.

That said, I'd seen my share of movies so bad they were actually perversely entertaining—and appreciated that they could even be thought provoking, if only because you were made to wonder *how* they'd ever been made. When I was a kid, I'd stay up late to catch Creature Feature screenings of *The Giant Claw*, *The Navy vs. the Night Monsters*, or *Squirm*, and a few years later stoner friends and I would venture to inner-city grind houses to giggle through the likes of *Glen or Glenda* or *Robot Monster*. After school, when I got a shit-kicking job with a film distributor, one of my responsibilities was quality control evaluations on the video transfers of cheapie acquisitions like *Girls School Screammers*, *Igor and the Lunatics*, and *Roller Blade*.

In the years since, I'd also glimpsed the other side of the

silver screen. *Empire* had taken me to the sets of movies that turned out bad. While I'd like to report the people behind Paris Hilton vehicle *House of Wax* were cretins or crackheads, they weren't. I'm neither, either—but that didn't stop *my* first and only produced screenplay for a TV thriller series called *Two Twisted* from getting critically dumped on as “cornball and cliché” by Sydney's leading newspaper. Then there was that time I took on a supporting role in a horror film that I thought was going to be seriously kick-ass but that quickly became considered one of the worst Australian films ever made. As they say, no one sets out to make a bad movie.

Sitting in the backyard on beer number four, I decided my experience made me as suited as anyone to a worst-movie quest. But I also sensed this was a Eureka! moment unlikely to survive the harsh light of day. So, to ensure I couldn't change my mind, I got up, logged on to Amazon and started buying up bad movies on VHS and DVD. Within half an hour, I'd ordered dozens and spent hundreds of dollars I didn't really have.

It was a weird, giddy feeling, paying good money for movies most people would pay *not* to see. I fought hard to banish visions of Clare, Ava, and I forced to live on donated gruel in some dripping halfway house thanks to my spending spree. But now firmly in the grip of my obsession, I kept on clicking that Buy button. *The Incredible Melting Man* for \$10.48! *Hercules in New York* for \$9.98! *Orgy of the Dead* for \$13.46!

I spent \$750 in under an hour. I was now committed. Catching my breath, I wondered whether I ought to *be* committed. The least I could do, before I continued bankrupting myself, was decide how I was going to work this thing. Initially, I thought I might spend a month watching bad movies but, looking at it closer, it was clear this would have to be a marathon, not a sprint.

The IMDb's Bottom 100 was but a starting point. I'd also

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have to seek out legendary flops, critical failures, cult curios, video-age obscurities, and the very worst films to disgrace the annual anti-Oscars, the Golden Raspberry Awards, a.k.a. the Razzies. I'd ask aficionados for their worst-ever recommendations. I'd keep abreast of new turkeys being hatched in cinemas. Obviously, there'd be *hundreds* of movies to consider. With January 1, 2007, one month away, it suddenly made sense that the New Year should become my *annus horribilis* of cinema. To keep the pressure on, my goal would be to average at least one bad movie a day.

Midnight came and went as I worked out other rules of engagement. Any feature-length movie that was—or had been—commercially available would be eligible. I ruled out porn, made-for-TV efforts, and foreign films that hadn't penetrated the English-speaking world because, well, I had to draw the line somewhere. Painful though it might be, I'd rewatch any genuinely deserving flick I'd already seen so I wouldn't be comparing dusty recollections of *Robot Monster* or *Can't Stop the Music* to fresh viewings of *Track of the Moon Beast* and *The Garbage Pail Kids Movie*. Each picture would be viewed in its entirety—no fast-forwarding. And where possible, I'd ask the antingeniuses responsible what in the *hell* they were thinking.

When Clare came home, I told her the plan.

"How many beers have you had?" she asked, not unreasonably.

"Five," I said. I'd forgotten to open the last one in my six-pack. A troubling sign of true obsession.

To my surprise, Clare said it sounded like an interesting, funny project.

"You think you'll want to watch 'em with me?" I asked a little too eagerly. "I mean, when we met, you *did* say you were a 'movie whore.'"

Clare did say that—meaning she was happy to watch any sort of film—early in our courtship. She lied.

“Not a chance, buddy.”

I quietly held out hope I could entice her to share some of them.

Over December, my ordering frenzy continued. I clocked up hundreds of titles, battered my Visa way into the red. The Amazon and eBay packages started arriving—a trickle at first, then a tidal wave of discs and tapes. I trembled at the enormity of the task. I assiduously didn’t keep track of expenditure. It was just too daunting.

I spent hours and days pondering exactly what constitutes a bad movie. Faltering acting, deadly dialogue, insane plots, po-faced themes, flat direction, dyslexic editing, out-of-focus camera work, cardboard sets, threadbare costumes, cheapo special effects, and clunky music—they all have their place. And I’d rank them each out of 10 or 20 toward a total of 100. I’ve pretty much divided it up into a score out of 10 each for acting, direction, script, theme/ideas, cinematography, music, and more general scores, from 20, for production value and general enjoyment. It wouldn’t be an exact science, it ain’t even Z-grade rocket science. Even more amorphously, it’d also come down to how a movie failed to meet its *own* ambitions, be they miniscule, modest, or magnificent. In fairness, though, I’d also have to consider any flickers of entertainment or elucidation that saved a production from total damnation. My biggest challenge would be in differentiating what’s so-bad-it’s-good, what’s so-very-bad-it’s-bad, and, ultimately, what’s so-very-very-bad-it’s-the-worst.

All that was left as the New Year approached was to work out in what order I’d watch my movies. The idea of a list arranged chronologically or alphabetically or by genre was just too wearisome to contemplate and a sure recipe for giving up.

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It needed to be broken down into bite-sized chunks. But how? Then—bingo!—the idea struck. Bingo! I'd divide the movies into groups based on genres, subjects, directors, and stars, assign each group a number, and let the random forces of the universe decide what I'd watch and when. With a quick scurry around eBay I found a toy bingo machine for ten dollars.

I put movies into categories. Pictures about asses and related anal matters got the number 1 in honor of a movie called *Anus Magillicutty*—self-proclaimed “worst movie ever made”—being the first disc that arrived in my mailbox. Other groupings included bad superhero epics, diabolical kiddie flicks, stinky sequels, terrible teenage tales, blaxploitation bangles, star vehicles for the likes of Bo Derek, Pia Zadora, John Travolta, and Madonna. As December 31 loomed, I couldn't wait to get started.

And now New Year's Eve is here. At least for one more second.

“One!”

“Happy New Year!” we all shout.

Once we're done with the kissing and pretending to know the lyrics to “Auld Lang Syne,” I pick up the little white bingo ball that's popped out of Bad Movie Bingo.

It's the number 11. I consult my index of categories. And the loser is . . .

JANUARY

It was horrible . . . utterly horrible . . . and fascinating.

—Richard Burton as Father Philip Lamont,

Exorcist II: The Heretic

ESZTERHAS OF PAIN

I've seen some of the movies on my list, but there's only one I've watched five times and that's 1995's *Showgirls*. I take it as a good omen that Bad Movie Bingo selects it as my baptism of dire.

So enamored of it was I back in 1999 that I made a pilgrimage to the Stardust Hotel in Las Vegas where the film is set. There I saw *Enter the Night*, a legendary titty revue, and laughed my ass off, which didn't endear me to the middle-aged couples sharing my booth. They treated the skates-and-sequins spectacle—ninety minutes of gyrations in G-strings for \$19.95, inclusive of all-you-can-eat-Mexican and two margaritas in souvenir cups—with the reverence usually reserved for \$500 seats at a Three Tenors concert.

Showgirls takes us behind the scenes of spectaculars like *Enter the Night*, being the journey of Nomi Malone, a crack whore who hitches into Vegas to claw and screw her way to the top, only to discover she's really hit bottom.

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“I worry that you’ve watched this five—now *six*—times,” Clare says as she walks through the lounge room, trailed by Ava, whose eyes are, happily, averted from the writhing topless women in bondage gear on the screen. “It’s like porn.”

I’m prepared for this.

“I’m as likely to get turned on by this as I am to laugh at *Two and a Half Men*,” I reply. And it’s true: An erection while doubled over with laughter isn’t scientifically feasible.

Part of the hysterical appeal of *Showgirls* is that it’s all so po-faced, from our antiheroine’s name being a phonetic koan—“Know me, I’m alone”—to the always-insane dialogue that peaks with the achingly sensitive, “It must be weird, not having anybody come on you.” Joe Eszterhas was Hollywood’s highest-paid screenwriter until he killed his career with this collaboration with his *Basic Instinct* director, Paul Verhoeven.

I do feel a little sorry for Elizabeth Berkley, who, as Nomi, is a nude doe in the spotlights. But it’s doubtful anyone could’ve done better with the role—even Charlize Theron, who missed out on the part. And Berkley wouldn’t even have taken Nomi if Jennifer Aniston hadn’t beaten *her* out for Rachel in *Friends*. In an alternative universe, Theron doesn’t have her *Monster* Oscar and it’s Berkley who’s America’s Sweetheart. In our world, she’ll always be remembered for bronco riding Kyle MacLachlan’s sleazy Stardust manager in a neon-lit pool.

Scenes like that are so transcendently funny I suspected this was a satire, like Verhoeven’s *Starship Troopers*. Verhoeven set me straight a few years back when I interviewed him for a career retrospective *Empire* feature. “*Showgirls* was not supposed to be a comedy,” the director corrected me in his staccato Dutch accent. “It was an attempt to show the pit of filth which Vegas is, to portray that in the most blatant terms!”

Showgirls was a blatant failure and scooped the Razzies, awards Verhoeven accepted personally. Until then, he and Eszterhas had planned a *sequel*. “Yah, it was going to be called *Bimbos!*” Verhoeven chortled. “It was going to be Nomi in Los Angeles.”

The mind boggles. But thinking about this, I wonder if *Showgirls* has *any* veracity. Akke Levin is the gal to tell me. She starred in *Enter the Night* and was promoted as a “Showgirl for the 21st Century” on the tails of jetliners, just like Nomi. Unlike Nomi, Akke didn’t ride the freeway into town—or out of it. Born in Holland, she danced at Paris’s famous Crazy Horse revue and became its media darling because she spoke five languages and was studying law. She signed on for *Enter the Night* and moved to Vegas just as *Showgirls* hit. “All the strippers started calling themselves showgirls,” she told me with a sigh when I called her. “If I said I was a showgirl, people’d say, ‘Oh, you’re a *pole dancer*.’”

I asked Akke if any of the film was true to life. She said she didn’t do drugs and her boss was openly gay so there was no inference she’d slept her way to the top. What *Showgirls* nailed was the utter bitchiness.

“Did you think you might get a stiletto in the back on the stairs?” I asked excitedly. In the film, Nomi takes the top job by literally toppling her mentor backstage.

“At least that would’ve been more honest,” Akke laughed. “I’ll never forget someone I thought was my friend telling me, ‘Who do you think you are? Why should you be on the billboards? Why are you getting interviews? You’ve got nothing to say. You’re a *nobody*.’”

Joe Eszterhas was close to nobody by the time his next movie, the 1997 satire *An Alan Smithee Film: Burn Hollywood Burn*, limped into release. Whereas *Showgirls* rates a 45/100 on the scale I’ve devised, this is an annoying, stupid

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mockumentary about director Alan Smithee trying to take his name off action movie *Trio* and discovering he can't because the official pseudonym for such cases is . . . Alan Smithee! Chalk this 24/100 effort as the most protracted in-joke ever. The irony is that Eszterhas's clashes with veteran director Arthur Hiller meant the latter took his name off the project, really making it an Alan Smithee film.

The sliver of interest in this movie is the small role of Michelle, who provides a glimpse into where Eszterhas might've taken Nomi in *Bimbos*. We're told she used to be a Vegas showgirl but is now the in-house whore to cameoing Hollywood reptile Bob Evans.

As for Akke's post-showgirl life? She retired when *Enter the Night* closed and is now married, a mother, and a successful Las Vegas litigator.

ATROCITIES

Around the time I saw *Enter the Night*, I also made pilgrimage to a four-story walk-up in Hell's Kitchen. You might've mistaken it for a crackhouse were it not for the huge mural of the Toxic Avenger, mascot of schlock outfit Troma Entertainment, emblazoned on the building. Inside this HQ, minions slaved away amid nests of bloodied prop arms and beneath walls decouped with posters for the likes of *Class of Nuke 'Em High* ("Readin', Writin', and Radiation!") and *Killer Condom* ("The Rubber That Rubs You Out!"). A three-foot Penis Monster puppet held pride of place on one shelf.

Lloyd Kaufman, Troma cofounder, self-forged cult icon, and aficionado of god-awful ties, proved an enormously entertaining conversationalist. "An oyster gets a piece of sand stuck in his asshole and he produces a pearl. It's very painful but the result is beautiful. That's Troma," he explained. "We're the piece of sand stuck in the asshole of the arts community."

Since 1974, Kaufman and Michael Herz have made and distributed schlock, including early efforts from Kevin Costner, Samuel L. Jackson, Marisa Tomei, and Billy Bob Thornton. But Lloyd also missed out on talents. He told me about rejecting Madonna *three times* for *The First Turn-On!* in 1983 and, more recently, losing the chance at *South Park* because he was too cheap to pay for copyright clearance on music in the show's pilot. Toward the end of our talk, I asked if there was any film he regretted releasing.

"The only movie about which I have second thoughts is *Bloodsucking Freaks*," he said solemnly. "We didn't make the film but we put some money into it and I think, because of the misogyny involved, I'd pass if it came around again."

Seven years later, I met with Lloyd again. He was a bit grayer but no less indefatigable in railing against the devil worshippers who run Hollywood. At the end of this interview, he handed over a Troma goody bag, including *Bloodsucking Freaks*, now in a deluxe DVD version. So much for that *mea culpa!*

I lock the bedroom door before putting Lloyd's disc on. I'm not worried about Ava, but Clare, whose tolerance for gore is low. I know what to expect because I saw this 1976 flick when I was a teen and I was shocked. This time, I'm amazed by how it's almost *quaint*—well, as quaint as any movie can be in which slave women munch a cock hot dog. *Freaks* is about demented beatnik Master Sardu and his dwarf, Ralphus, who run one of those off-off-off-Broadway torture-slavery operations. I can't help but laugh that they actually have a medico who makes *dungeon calls*. His payment? Pulling a woman's teeth out, forcing her to give him a blow job, and then drilling a hole in her head so he can suck her brains out with a straw. Okay, I *can* see why feminists protested the movie, but the gore is palpably fake and the whole vibe's too over-the-top to seriously offend.

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January third is my first day back at work after a two-week Christmas vacation. While I enjoyed the time off, hanging with Clare and Ava, I have to admit I did spend a lot of time thinking about this moment. Watching three movies in the past two days—50 percent over target!—was easy, a warm-up. The real challenge will be fitting them in with *Empire* duties and a normal home life. That'll mean either staying up late at night or, like today, getting in to work at 7:00 a.m. to use our screening room. It does feel kinda creepy watching 1980's *Cannibal Holocaust* at this hour in the empty office. Something a serial killer might do. That's because this one, like *Bloodsucking Freaks*, also resulted in a media ruckus for its extreme violence. I'm glad I haven't had breakfast when I watch it. The film has four newshounds' vicious provocations causing Amazonian tribespeople to tear them apart and eat them. The centerpiece, featuring castration and vaginal impalement, is utterly compelling, if utterly repellent, and director Ruggero Deodato famously had to produce his actors in court to disprove rumors that he'd actually killed them. What he couldn't dispute was that he really slaughtered a lot of animals to make his movie. A snake, monkey, raccoon, pig, and some turtles are killed on-screen in stomach-churning detail meant to show the Americans' descent into savagery. Deodato's defense was that many of the critters were cooked and eaten by the cast and crew. I suppose it did save on craft services.

A MYSTERY SCIENCE RECOMMENDS

"On the show, we had the likes of *Robot Monster*, which is a cult classic," Kevin Murphy—who played wiseass robot Tom Servo on cult parody TV show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*—told me a few weeks back. "The reason I like it is because there's a certain class of movie that's a noble

failure—and Ed Wood’s in this category too. You really can appreciate that these guys did their best to tell an imaginative and interesting story and just really didn’t have the talent or the money or the wherewithal to do it. They poured their hearts out onto the screen and still it ended up being a laughable mess.”

I’d never seen *MST3K* because it never made it to Australia, but knowing of it—and seeing that Murphy had also written *A Year at the Movies: One Man’s Filmgoing Odyssey*, in which he chronicled watching one movie a day in different theaters all over the world—I sensed he’d be my sorta guy. So I’d called him up to talk about my project and get his bad-movie reflections and recommendations. The movies he genuinely loathes, he told me, are much bigger than the Z-grade flicks parodied on the show. “When you see a film like Warren Beatty’s *Town & Country*, you can see all the ego in the world on the screen,” he said, anticipating a flop already on my list. “Schadenfreude is a classic human emotion. We have a passion for seeing people we hold up as models of success fall down. That goes back to Aristophanes.”

For Murphy, knowing the production history of the film can also affect his experience of it. *Town & Country*, for instance, cost \$90 million, which makes it a different proposition from the works of Ed Wood. “All the badness just comes off the screen—incompetently made and morally bankrupt, a nice combination,” he said of Beatty’s folly. “That said, I would challenge anyone, without even knowing the story behind it, to try to sit through *Cutthroat Island*.”

Challenge accepted, Captain!

At home that night, I pop an old thrift-store video of the movie into my creaking VHS player. *Cutthroat Island* has a lady pirate evading her evil pirate uncle as she searches for treasure—using her dead dad’s scalp map, which she keeps in

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her britches. Geena Davis swashbuckles with gusto but is all at sea in awkward romantic scenes with emasculated costar Matthew Modine. Director Renny Harlin—then Davis’s hubby—spent \$92 million blowing shit up. “I don’t want surprising, I want stunning,” he wrote in a production memo. “I don’t want fast, I want explosive. I don’t want accidents, I want disasters.” He got his last wish and for years after its 1995 release this was the biggest box office failure on record, grossing just \$11 million. I can’t say I *hate* it—it’s a 40/100 for sheer spectacle—but it is unforgivable that no one *ever* says, “ARRRR!”

Kevin Murphy reserved the inner circle of his movie hell for 1995 Best Picture Oscar winner *Forrest Gump*. “I could have a hand up my ass and I wouldn’t feel as manipulated,” seethed the former *MST3K* puppet master. “Here’s a scene: Cry now. Here’s a scene: Laugh wistfully but not too much. Here’s a crip-ple: If you don’t find this heartwarming, then you have no heart.”

After I watch it again, I lean a *little* more toward Kevin’s view. You know the drill. It’s *The Dummy’s Guide to American History 1955–1983*, scored to fragments of great songs. And sucker that I am, I get swept along. Stupid is as stupid does, I guess.

HOWLERS

It’s the weekend and I’m laughing so hard it hurts.

Ava’s having her afternoon nap and Clare’s getting her daily exercise fix by doing Pilates in the lounge room. She’s the physical type, which I respect even if, try as I might sporadically with bursts of the stationary bike or power walking, I can’t quite emulate. We’re not quite Homer and Marge, but she’s definitely an ectomorph to my endomorph. But now I may have discovered a simple way to that six-pack stomach—that

is, if all bad movies could be as funny as 1985's *Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf*. It's hilarious enough to count as an abdominal workout.

This is the story of queen werewolf Stirba's upcoming ten thousandth birthday, causing the world's other lycanthropes to reveal themselves. Sybil Danning's Stirba is a bi-curious beast who breaks out in cotton candy fur and shoots orange lasers from her fingertips. Inspired by so-called New Wave eroticism, she also gets around in an outfit made from black venetian blinds with chrome strips. *Howling II*'s other "stars," Annie McEnroe and Reb Brown, are so bad that in some scenes supporting actor Christopher Lee—still years from his *Lord of the Rings/Star Wars* comeback—closes his eyes, as if wishing himself away. Just when I think it's over, the movie delivers a coup de grâce of end-credits "highlights" that repeats a scene of Sybil baring her boobs *seventeen* times.

"You couldn't do it seriously," French-born Australian director Philippe Mora told me of *Howling II*, which also went by the even sillier names *Howling II: It's Not Over Yet* and *Howling II: Stirba—Werewolf Bitch*. "It was Grand Guignol."

The film was shot in Soviet-controlled Prague and he told me he was constantly yelling "Clit!"—the Czech word for "shut up"—to quell his large local crew, much to the amusement of the few English speakers on the production. "I suspected my assistant director was KGB," he said. "He knew *nothing* about making movies." Mora had to literally import trash from America to clutter the clean communist streets. "And when we put out a call for punks, one thousand showed up! The authorities called out the police and the army. We were surrounded. I spoke to a colonel and he said, 'You can finish shooting the scene but they'll have to leave in no more than groups of three.' That was gung ho."

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MORA RETURNED TO HIS big-screen beasts two years later with 1987's *Howling III: The Marsupials*, which he shot on home turf in Australia. It's about an outback girl who flees her incestuous clan of marsupial werewolves to live in Sydney. There she falls pregnant and has to escape to bush exile to birth her "evolutionary freak." But she's pursued by assassins, hunters, and her sister werewolves, disguised as nuns. It's a kitsch explosion of lycanthropic transformations on a city street, a ballet stage, and at the Oscars.

"We Australians have a marsupial version of everything, including the wolf. Why not put that into the pop zeitgeist?" Mora laughed. "It was comedic—werewolves with pouches!—but I wanted to be *pro* these creatures."

Fair enough, but back to *Howling II* for a moment. *I have to know, how did Sybil feel about having her rack shown seventeen times?* "Oh, she was absolutely mortified," Mora guffawed. "I had done it five times because I thought it was funny. Unbeknownst to me, the producer saw it and thought it was the greatest thing he'd ever seen. He said to the editor, 'Reprint that!' So he has to get a lot of credit."

CHARACTER FLAWS

Twelve days in and so far so good. Well, kind of. Ava tiptoed through the lounge room yesterday with no pants on, which made me wonder whether she did glimpse *Showgirls*. If she drops out of med school to become a pole dancer, I'll never forgive myself. And now, as I'm about to embark on five comedies about dopey characters, Clare, who has taken to calling herself a "bad-movie widow," drops the question I've dreaded: "How much have you spent so far?"

I pause unwrapping the insanely complicated packaging on the DVD of spy flop *Leonard Part 6*. "I don't know," I say. Like a hack secret agent, I *do* have plausible deniability. I've made a

point of *not* adding up the total expenditure. Cunning, I know.

Clare looks at me.

“Probably around . . . two grand?”

She maintains an inscrutable gaze.

“I’d just better get some screenwriting work,” I add quickly.

“That’d be good, baby,” Clare says, before heading out to the backyard to hang with Ava.

Did I detect a note of sarcasm there?

But on the screenwriting front, things do look promising. I’ve received some good Hollywood feedback on the sci-fi thing. A well-regarded British company really liked a zombie outbreak story I wrote for Tim Bullock, the director of my *Two Twisted* episode. A couple of Australian producers want me to do script doctoring. And then there’s *Revenants*, my WWII horror about Japanese ghost soldiers, still creeping toward financing after . . . three years under option.

But this afternoon, rather than endorsing seven-figure studio checks, I’m jotting down notes on *Leonard Part 6*, which writer-producer-star Bill Cosby publicly warned people off in 1987. To answer the obvious questions: Yes, Leonard did have adventures one through five. And no, they weren’t made into movies, because, as the deeply unfunny narration tells us, they’re still highly classified. Instead we’re asked to imagine how Leonard came to be a) driving an armor-plated Porsche, b) dancing in ballet shoes, and c) riding an ostrich off a roof. The rest of the film is a flashback to explain these cretinous opening images.

Evil vegetarian Medusa is using brainwashed critters—cats, squirrels, bullfrogs, *trout*—to kill CIA agents as a precursor to an “all-animal offensive” on San Francisco. Only Leonard can save the day. After interminable business with a fortune teller and his ex-wife, he drives to Medusa’s headquarters in his Porsche. There Leonard defeats her

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caricatured gay henchmen with magical ballet shoes. After surviving attack by lobster and repelling more mincing minions—this time with magical meat patties—he sets the animal army free and escapes on the ostrich.

The movie has to be the worst thing to happen to San Francisco since the 1906 earthquake.

Clare comes in from the backyard. “How was it?” she asks. The look on my face says it all.

“The worst so far?” she laughs.

“It’s hard to imagine there’ll be a worse movie than this.”

But there is and it’s 1994’s *It’s Pat*, which was released with a PG-13 rating “for bizarre gender-related humor.” (I like 1995’s *Jefferson in Paris*’s PG-13 better: “Mature theme, some images of violence, and a bawdy puppet show.”) Played by Julia Sweeney, Pat was developed as a character on *Saturday Night Live*. The single joke is that from birth onward, no one can decide whether he’s a he or she’s a she. As the theme song goes, “A lot of people say, ‘What’s that?’ It’s Pat!”

I’ve nothing against gender-bending but I am prejudiced against braying idiots. And *that’s* Pat. Sweeney and Co. make him/her a slug-browed, bespectacled eyesore *and* a chortling, nasally moron with a personality like nails on a blackboard as s/he loses a variety of jobs and is wooed by Dave Foley’s drag bartender. Put it this way: Kathy Griffin plays herself and she’s the *least* grating presence. I’m not sure if the late-movie message of self-acceptance, delivered by Camille Paglia, was meant to be part of the joke. Either way, it’s hard to imagine the transgender community regarding this flick as anything but a kick in the nonspecifics.

I breeze through Carrot Top’s 1998 surfer-inventor comedy *Chairman of the Board*, which certainly isn’t good, but it’s nowhere near as dire as the red-haired comic’s many haters claim. Same goes for 2006’s *Larry the Cable Guy: Health Inspector*. The redneck shtick offered—Larry drives a gas-

guzzling ve-hickle with bumper stickers like GUN CONTROL MEANS HITTING YOUR TARGET—is charmless but also so dumb it’d be churlish to be offended.

In terms of character-centered movie disasters, they don’t get much bigger than *Gigli*. To recap for the 99 percent of people who missed it: Affleck is Larry Gigli—it’s pronounced to rhyme with “Marry? Really,” which was what the world was then saying about its stars, Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez—and he’s a knucklehead assigned by the mob to kidnap Brian, the Tourette’s-afflicted teenage brother of a prosecutor. Because Larry’s such a moron, *he is assigned a minder* in J.Lo’s lesbian hit woman, Ricki.

Larry doesn’t have a single book in his house so when Brian asks for a story, our hero has to read to him from a Tabasco sauce label. Meant to be touching, it’s excruciating. More embarrassing is Brian’s tender admission that *Baywatch* “made my penis sneeze.” The cringiest stuff is between the ill-starred leads. Affleck goes wet-eyed as he professes love to his “dykosaurus rex.” But J.Lo gets the worst. Her long discourse about the penis as sea slug and the vagina as a mouth—delivered while bending herself into narcissistic yoga poses—is but a mere warm-up for priceless oral sex come-ons “It’s turkey time—gobble, gobble” and the less-celebrated “Lay some of that sweet heterolinguus on me.”

It’s not *all* bad. J.Lo confounding thugs with martial arts mumbo jumbo is okay, Christopher Walken has a typically oddball monologue, and Al Pacino gets a show-stoppingly violent scene. Mostly, the black comedy is just tasteless and mirthless, hitting its lowest point when an idiot plot contrivance dictates Larry hack the thumb off a corpse while Sir Mix-a-Lot’s *Baby Got Back* plays.

DESPITE THIS BEING THE first film to win all six major Razzies, *Gigli* isn’t the worst movie of all time, just a smug bore.

BIGFEET

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, whenever we'd go to visit my grandfather in his leafy suburban abode, my younger brother David would race out into the old man's leafy garden to capture little lizards basking in the morning sun. Once we'd tired of our catch-and-release program, we'd spend the afternoon luxuriating in the spare room that contained decadence beyond compare in the form of a second TV, free of parental interference. On such days, there was one show that unfailingly made our world a bigger, more fascinating place: *In Search of . . .* Part *National Geographic* documentary, part *The Twilight Zone*, it was narrated by *Star Trek*'s Leonard Nimoy with the cool detachment of his half-Vulcan science officer. While his investigations into killer bees, ancient astronauts, and Stonehenge were, quite frankly, fucking awesome, it was Bigfoot who always stood head and shoulders above the rest.

That was because of the *evidence*: grainy 1967 footage that showed a big hairy hominid stalking away from a home movie camera. Known as the "Patterson-Gimlin film," it was to cryptozoologists what the Zapruder footage is to JFK conspiracy theorists. Unhappily, the film—which was eventually revealed to be a hoax—also really lowered the bar for Bigfoot movies by demonstrating that all you needed for a DIY Sasquatch saga was some sort of camera, woods, and an ape suit.

In 1970's *Bigfoot*, jiggly Joi Lansing is caught by men in such suits, and short ones at that. Joi ponders her fate. "The only thing I can figure on is that they're a dying race and they want to reproduce more of their own kind," she decides, not sounding *too* perturbed by the prospect.

I lumber on, like a Sasquatch fleeing a Super 8, to the horrible hybrid freak that is *Curse of Bigfoot*. The provenance of this one is murky. Apparently it began production in the late

1950s or early 1960s under the title *Teenagers Battle the Thing* but wasn't completed. In 1976, new footage was shot for release as *Curse of Bigfoot*, before it was then sold to TV under the *Teenagers* title. In any guise, it's awful. The later-shot framing scenes have Leif Garrett-era kids listening to an expert telling them about his Bigfoot experience. "As a result of that field trip, three of those students will spend the rest of their lives in a mental institution," he says. It feels like that's where this flick has escaped from. We flash back to ruddy-colored scenes of Frankie Avalon-era teens mouthing dialogue offcuts from *Leave It to Beaver*. Eventually these nerds find a mummified creature, which, if looked at in the right way—after a head injury or twenty-two beers—*might* be described "Bigfootesque." Otherwise, it's a moth-eaten ape suit with a face mask that looks like a big, greasy breakfast gone moldy. Surely those eyes are dried out eggs? The fangs toast crusts?

But it's a masterpiece next to 1997's *Search for the Beast*. Shot on video with a hissing soundtrack, this begins with a shoddy soft-core porn scene that culminates in a topless girl "attacked" by what appears to be a badly lit photograph of a gorilla's torso. As hero Dave, nonactor Rick Montana is a disaster who literally *reads* his lines in some scenes. As love interest Wendy, even-less-of-an-actress Holly Day is somehow *worse*. I don't believe she understands drawled illiteracies such as, "Are you lookin' for the missin' link? I've read everythin' you've wrote on the subject."

Halfway through the movie, director R. G. Arledge gives up even on such dire-logue altogether. Instead he gets Montana to do a voice-over that combines Dave's thoughts, his lines, *and* the dialogue of other characters. It is *insane*. But the craziness gets crazier.

When we finally see Bigfoot he looks like the lovechild of Marty Feldman and a monkey. Any comical effect is shattered

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when he forcibly has his way with a hippie girl, who stares into the camera glumly as she's pounded. It's hideous and ties in to the revelation that the film's ominous hillbillies are blood relations to Bigfoot and they're all in the rape-abduction-breeding business.

As the misspelled credits roll, my mind reels. I wonder whether after just two weeks, I've not only searched for but have already *found* my beast. Whereas *Leonard* clocked up 20/100 and *It's Pat* 18/100, this rates just 12/100. Can there be a *worse* movie?

A few nights later, my friend Chris Murray comes over. He was the founding editor of Australia's *Empire*, launching it in 2001 from an office next to *FHM*, where I worked as features editor. I'd gotten that men's magazine gig in 2000, largely on the strength of a story I'd done about Lloyd Kaufman and Troma for a rival, since-defunct publication called *Max*. I had enjoyed my time at *FHM*, and loved doing interesting interviews with guys with great jobs, like the forensic psychologist who specialized in serial killers, or the super-cool F/A-18 jet pilot. The downside was the play-hard, work-hard vibe of the mag. We'd do sixty-, seventy-, and even eighty-hour weeks, and then blow off steam in ridiculous drinking frenzies that seemed to go as long. The other downside was having to interview vapid bikini models and ask them embarrassing (for them, and for me) questions about their sex lives.

So, when *Empire* launched, I jumped at the chance to contribute reviews and features as a freelancer and, in 2002, when their reviews editor position needed filling, I took the job, taking a pay cut to do so. But now I was Watching Movies for a Living! A lifelong dream fulfilled.

I've been there ever since. Chris moved on in 2004 to try his hand at movie producing and running the film-event company Popcorn Taxi. Presently, among his numerous projects, Chris

and his business partner are trying to finance my *Revenants* script.

Tonight the first movie they cut their teeth on, a zero-budget crime comedy called *Fink!* that starred our acquaintance, the then-unknown Sam Worthington, is being screened on network TV.

This is the first time that Chris has seen the film because a falling out with another producer saw him leave the project. He delivers a painful live commentary of moans, groans, and the frequent “*Fuck!* I can’t believe they cut it that way!” I visited the *Fink!* set and, while it was never going to be more than a romp, the end result is an incoherent shambles. It’s a reminder of how bad movies happen to good people.

“Christ that was bad,” an ashen Chris says when it’s over.

To cheer him up, I say it wasn’t *that* bad. He looks at me disbelievingly.

I put *Search for the Beast* on and skip to the highlights.

“Oh my God!” Chris says, wiping away tears, literally trying to catch his breath between laughing convulsions. “I never knew a movie could be like this!”

It’s a reminder of how much fun other people’s bad movies can be.

MURDERIN’ MUTANT MANIACS . . . FROM SPACE

Like literally millions of other kids, my love affair with the movies began with *Star Wars* in 1977. I remember films before that, but only barely. I recall clambering around in the backseat, aged about four, during a drive-in double feature of *Diamonds Are Forever* and *Live and Let Die*. Being dragged to *The Sound of Music* at the church hall. Going with my dad to see the animated *Robin Hood* one Saturday afternoon and throwing up during a school excursion to watch *Pete’s Dragon* at the local cinema.

But it was during a family excursion to see *Sinbad and the*

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Eye of the Tiger at a beautiful old art deco theater in western Sydney—since converted into apartments—that my brother and I got our first glimpse of the trailer for George Lucas’s space epic. “Can we see *that*?” we both yelled, echoed by other kids throughout the auditorium. I remember enjoying Ray Harryhausen’s stop-motion saber-tooth vs. cyclops fight in *Sinbad* well enough, but afterward all my brother and I could talk about was that other movie, the one with the spaceships and laser swords and the boy and the girl swinging across that chasm and that goddamned tall black robot strangling that dude.

When *Star Wars* finally made it to our shores, in October of 1977, I was just seven and my brother five, and we loved it. We saw it again. Talked about it. Acted it out. At a Christmas party that year, I insisted on dressing like Han Solo—combining a vest, a white skivvy, and black shorts with boots. The laughter of the girls I’d hoped to impress couldn’t quite be drowned out by my toy Han Solo pistol’s sound effects. I didn’t care too much. I was, as it’d be called decades later, “geeking out,” and there ensued half-a-decade’s worth of birthdays and Christmases dominated by *Star Wars* action figures, novelizations, and, of course, the countdown to the next sequel. The long wait between films was filled with excitement over any movie or TV show about space and the monsters who inhabited it. So, naturally, when I heard *The Incredible Melting Man* and *Laserblast* were coming out, I was psyched. What could be sweeter? Well, actually being allowed to see them, for one. Unfortunately for me, my parents, who were okay with me watching *Battlestar Galactica* and *Buck Rogers* on TV, adjudged that I was too young for such potentially nightmare-inducing fare.

NOW, THANKS TO MY project, I’m finally to see what I missed out on back in the day. And I feel strangely offended that both of

these movies are in the Bottom 100. Surely they can't be that bad? As a bonus, when I saw the IMDb's Bottom 100 contained another man-monster from space film called *Track of the Moonbeast*, I threw it into this segment.

I start with 1976's *Moonbeast*, which has a young mineralogist hit by a meteor fragment and turning into a hulking monitor lizard mutant. If he's not stopped, the moon will cause him to atomically explode. It's all based on the most rigorous science. Our hero is Professor Johnny Longbow Salina, a Native Indian professor of Plot Exposition, played by Gregorio Sala, clearly a graduate of the William Shatner Drama School: "He said. The camp was. Attacked. By a lizard. That walked. Like a man."

While it's flatly shot and directed, the effects are also terrible, with the meteor looking like a flaming falafel on a string. Future Oscar winner Rick Baker's monster suit is better, but still basically a *Creature from the Black Lagoon* knockoff.

Baker's work on 1977's *The Incredible Melting Man* is more impressive, even if *The Quite Effective Melting Man* is perhaps more accurate. The title character is just plain old astronaut Steve West until space radiation turns him into a rampaging goo monster. Steve is played by Alex Rebar, who'd later be credited with *Sex, Pain and Murder, Episode Two: Castration Elation*. Thankfully, in this it's only his ears and eyes that are dropping off.

The Incredible Melting Man is an oddity. While there's plenty of deliberate jocular humor, such as the hobo who says of gloopy Steve, "You think we've got trouble, look at that dude," there's also bizarre unintentional humor as when, in the finale, reluctant hero Ted repeats over and over, "Steve, it's me Ted Nelson!" as though this will somehow reverse the human-candle process.

"The film was supposed to be a spoof on horror films,"

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writer-director William Sachs told me of his movie. “During shooting [the producers] decided that it would make more money as a straight horror film. They took it away from me and shot new bad material and attempted to remove the spoof aspect. It became like an Amphicar. If you don’t know what that is, or was, it’s part boat, part car, and wasn’t a good car or boat because it tried to be two things at once and failed.” (It reminds me of Ben Affleck’s later description of *Gigli*: “It was like trying to put a fish’s tail on a donkey’s head.”) Despite the interference, Sachs still digs parts of his flick. “I can laugh at the funny parts, like his ear on the tree,” he said. “How can a serious horror movie end with the monster being shoveled into a garbage can?” He has a point there.

I’m sure as an eight-year-old I would’ve dug the spectacle of 1978’s *Laserblast* in which teen-hunk Billy finds an alien weapon and uses it on his enemies while going green and insane. I have quite a good time watching it now. But as much as I would’ve enjoyed seeing Billy blow shit up real good, no doubt I would’ve been enraged by him using his laser gun to destroy a *Star Wars* billboard. Sacrilege!

SPIELBERG AND LUCAS STRIKE OUT

Spookily, Bad Movie Bingo seems to be divining a “six degrees” style higher power, for now it throws out the two films that demonstrated even seventies gods Steven Spielberg and George Lucas weren’t immune from making crap. Why it’s weird is because Spielberg’s *1941* also features *Laserblast*’s nerd-villain Eddie Deezen—just as *Melting Man* and *Laserblast* shared poor doomed Cheryl “Rainbeaux” Smith. Anyway, while geek is now chic, Deezen got there first, beginning with Eugene in *Grease* and then reprising his supporting-insect persona for, well, the rest of his career.

I’m curious and make contact. Eddie’s happy to talk—so

long as I pay him *ten dollars*. “I honestly do not need the money, but I love getting checks in the mail,” he explains.

I find his reasoning hilarious, endearing, and, well, nerdy. I don’t think I’m seriously compromising my ethics by paying for this story, so I sent off his stipend.

Eddie doesn’t have much to say about *Laserblast*, other than it was a shoddy production and that he loved the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* parody. But he has plenty of war stories about *1941*. He got sick during one of the days he spent in a Ferris wheel and was led to the director’s trailer to recover. “I not only got to lay down on Mr. Spielberg’s bed, but I had the very rare honor of throwing up in Steven Spielberg’s toilet,” he says. Another day, he had lunch with Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, and Spielberg. “I was scared out of my wits. I tried to act casual as I sat among these great men . . . and then I realized I had no cash on me.” Despite the fond memories, Eddie doesn’t really rate *1941* either: “It was too disjointed and the jokes do not fly.”

Eddie’s appraisal is dead on. Spielberg starts by unwisely homage-parodying himself with stuntwoman Denise Cheshire reprising her *Jaws* dip as a WWII Japanese sub surfaces beneath her. It’s Christmas, 1941, and Los Angeles is panicked about getting the Pearl Harbor treatment. Women are “khaki wacky” for men in uniform, two jitterbuggers pose as soldiers to woo dames, a home defense is mounted on coastal cliffs, and inept Japanese soldiers come ashore.

The movie is a nonstop barrage of screwball, slapstick, and special effects. Spielberg wound up chewing through \$35 million—\$24 million over budget—and shot more than one million feet of film in 247 days. I picked up the promotional tie-in book at a yard sale recently and it gleefully describes how a \$260,000 house was pushed off a cliff, ten thousand feet of neon lights were machine gunned, and how fifteen thousand

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nonsense T-shirts were printed on a whim. And that's the problem: Spielberg wants us to get our laughs from his big spend. But it's hollow spectacle, whether it's Aykroyd driving a tank through a paint factory or Belushi's crazy pilot streaking across the sky. The smaller moments are funniest, such as ninja assassins dressed as Christmas trees and Deezen's bit with a ventriloquist doll. Still, this is a 52/100, which ain't too bad.

No such incidental pleasures can be found in 1986's *Howard the Duck*. While coscripted and directed by *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *American Graffiti* writer Willard Huyck, this live-action adaptation of Steve Gerber's comic book nevertheless has executive producer George Lucas's stamp from the opening scene, which is—*sigh*—a homage-parody to *Star Wars* that has two moons over Howard the Duck's home world. This quack lives in an apartment in Marshington, D.C., decorated with posters for *Breeders of the Lost Stork* and *Splashdance*. He drinks beer, ogles the birds in *Playduck*, and works as a perfume salesman. His wallet holds a MallardCard. And a little duck condom.

Our featherbrain is sucked out of his parallel duckiverse by a physics experiment on Earth. This scene involves a topless lady duck with lady-duck boobs. Howard lands in Cleveland, where he flirts with Lea Thompson's poodle-haired rock chick, Beverly, evades Tim Robbins's duck-obsessed scientist, and tries to stop Jeffrey Jones's cackling Dark Overlord of the Universe.

Howard the Duck is much, much less fun than it sounds, and rates a painful 28/100. Seeing a duck as a towel-and-lotion boy at a sex club is just wrong. Worse is when Howard and Beverly hop into bed. "You think I might find happiness in the animal kingdom, ducky?" she purrs, as I try to gouge my eyes out with the remote.

Spielberg's 1941 foreshadowed good future work—a deleted scene has the coat-hanger-torture device joke he'd perfect in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—but *Howard* predicts how Lucas would pummel our senses with Jar Jar Binks. At least that annoying CGI alien didn't try to tap Natalie Portman's ass. *Howard* had one happy outcome. Once it laid an egg at the box office, Lucas was forced to sell off his new CGI animation division. The buyer was Steve Jobs of Apple and the company went on to become Pixar.

STINKY NUMBER TWOS

A legacy of being raised Catholic is a fear of anything “devil-y.” You spend your childhood with Satan shadowing your every step, just ready to suck your soul to hell forever. When I was eleven I was freaked out to discover that the “mark of the beast” *really* was in the Book of Revelation. Hey, *I was adopted*. Maybe I was—*shudder*—the Antichrist! I spent a nervous evening with a mirror trying to see if I, like Damien in the second *Omen* movie, had the 666 birthmark hidden under my hair. I didn't, but I am forever grateful that it wasn't until a few years later that my parents gave me my original birth certificate on which was recorded my initial name . . . *Damian*. Seriously.

So, sitting down to watch 1977's *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, I'm concerned I'll get freaked out. But the only scary thing is its incoherence. Linda Blair's Regan is now a teen who can heal autistic kids and tap-dance, for which she's targeted by the demon Pazuzu, King of the Evil Spirits of the Air. Meanwhile, Richard Burton's priest, Lamont, investigates the death of Father Merrin in the first movie. He visits Regan in a futuristic headshrinking lab for clinically weird kids and together they don the electrode headbands of the “hypno-sync” machine. They go cross-eyed to its strobes and whoops as it puts them in a virtual reality of shoddily superimposed images

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from *The Exorcist*. When it's done, a drunken Richard Burton stares at the camera to say what I've been thinking: "It was horrible . . . utterly horrible . . . and fascinating."

I swear I didn't rig the Bad Movie Bingo but 1982's *Grease 2* is next on my list and it's *another* Eddie Deezen appearance, albeit a brief one, as Eugene. Ever-honest Eddie says the movie is "pretty lame" but that he enjoyed making it. That's because Deezen got to share leading man Maxwell Caulfield's cookies and found himself "mesmerized" by newcomer Michelle Pfeiffer. "I said to her, 'You're beautiful.' She said, 'Thanks.' That was all I ever said to her."

I feel for you, Eddie. Michelle was one of my teen crushes, but despite Pfeiffer fever I never could bring myself to see *Grease 2*. Good call, my former self, because it sucks. Maxwell plays a British chap who falls for Michelle's Pink Lady and adopts a hard-ass Cool Rider biker persona to win her affections. The highlight is Tab Hunter's teacher leading his writhing, thrusting class of teens through a song called "Reproduction." ("Now you see just how the stamen gets its lusty dust on to the stigma/And why this frenzied chlorophyllous orgy starts each spring is no enigma!") This DVD is a keeper for when Ava starts asking the tricky questions.

Like *Grease 2*, 1991's *Return to the Blue Lagoon* is a bomb sequel to a Randal Kleiser-directed hit made minus the original leads. This has baby Richard, son of Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins, washed back up on the same island with a baby girl, Lilli, and her mother, Sarah.

It pulls out all stops to be uncomfortable, with sex-education talks for the kids referencing cowrie shells and iguanas. Sarah's death accelerates the ick factor, with the children rapidly growing up to become Milla Jovovich and Brian Krause. She loves her new breasts—but not as much as he does. After some token resistance and a DIY beach wedding, they succumb to

their urges in PG-13 soft-core porn. Lilli eventually gives birth to Richard's baby. Faced with the option of leaving for civilization, the little family decides to stay put.

I watch this one in the bedroom while Clare's glued to *America's Next Top Model* in the lounge room. Afterward, we reconvene for a glass of wine.

"And how was that trip to paradise?" she asks.

I fill her in on the vapid story line, blank performances, unresolved heathen-tribe subplot, deeply questionable incest vibe, and queasy sex-ed moments.

"I read in the paper today that Sydney's now in the top ten most expensive places in the world to buy a house or send a kid to school," Clare says.

It's the sort of news you don't want to hear when you're both working full-time and only just covering rent and bills. *Oh*.

"Is this about how much I've spent on bad movies?" I ask defensively.

"No," she laughs, "I was just thinking *Return to the Blue Lagoon* doesn't sound so bad. Tropical island, homeschooling, and, if we were the only ones there, we'd never have to give Ava the 'iguanas and cowries' talk."

Speaking of iguanas and cowries, *Another 9 1/2 Weeks* is next. I ask if Clare wants to watch it.

I know she was a fan of the Mickey Rourke–Kim Basinger original.

"What if it turned us on and we had sex?" she says. "You'd have to note that?"

I agree that I would. She goes to bed and leaves me to face the danger alone.

I'd be ashamed to admit I got a boner—or worse—watching a film presently at number 11 on the Bottom 100. But it is possible. Porn is a bigger business than Hollywood and its output is bad movies to get people steamed up.

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Then again, the original *9 ½ Weeks* didn't lead to sex, despite my very best intentions. My first-ever girlfriend and I got stoned while watching the video when my parents were out. What could be better for two seventeen-year-olds still in the rabbit phase that follows lost virginity? I'm saying a movie whose eroticism doesn't depend on sticky food items. Mickey and Kim's antics led to the giggles, then an attack of the munchies that saw us eat all the food we'd planned to incorporate into our raunchfest.

I shouldn't have worried. Nor should Clare. Mickey Rourke's wrecked face is the first drip in this 105-minute cinematic cold shower. When we begin, still stuck in 1980s lighting—despite the film being made in 1997—Rourke's gloomy sex addict, John Gray (not, it must be noted, the author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*), plays Russian roulette and flicks a hooker's nipples with a scalpel. Even such extreme erotica bores him; he's much more excited by *a horse being put down* on the street below his hotel. The only thrill he ever knew was Elizabeth. And so he travels to France to find her, unaware that Kim Basinger wasn't dumb enough to sign on for this sequel.

Instead, he meets Angie Everhart, and tries to have sex with her in Marie Antoinette's prison cell before taking her forcefully in a canal populated by copulating New Wave types. There's a reenactment of the original's food-sex fest, which saw Rourke empty the contents of his fridge onto and into Basinger. Angie takes him to an Arabic casino and promises to bankrupt him. "You can't lose all my money," he drones, like us, bored beyond belief. A million years later, Mickey gets into a dull threesome that ends when Steven Berkoff blunders in to announce that Elizabeth is dead. Way to put a downer on the ménage, serious actor guy!

So little happens—and happens so slowly—that this almost

defies description as a moving picture. And it's so antierotic it might be prescribed to psychologically castrate sex offenders, although the Supreme Court would declare it a cruel and unusual punishment.

Clare and I do share 1997's *Speed 2: Cruise Control*. No sex threat here as Sandra Bullock returns as Annie, now girlfriend to Jason Patric's cop. He whisks her onto the giant ocean liner *Seaborn Legend* to pop the question. Problem is, Willem Dafoe's computer hacker terrorist has taken control of the vessel. Upon opting out of this, Keanu Reeves reportedly noted that, um, dude, ocean liners don't actually, like, travel at *speed*. And verily this is notable for a snoozeworthy "climax" where the boat plows through a seaside resort inch by relentless inch. Bullock called the \$110 million flop "the biggest piece of crap ever made." Of course, she was a few years away from making *Miss Congeniality*'s sequel.

"Well, that was boring," Clare declares as the credits roll.

She's right. And that's the problem—the more of the bad movies she sees, the fewer of them she'll want to watch. As far as paradoxes go, it's up there with Schrödinger's Cat.

I'm resigning myself to flying solo most of the next eleven months.

I am the next night, when we're at Clare's parents' place in the Blue Mountains, sixty miles west of Sydney. After a big family dinner, I curl up in bed with my laptop and headphones. While my beloved sleeps beside me, I blearily watch *Son of the Mask*. Released in 2005, this spin-off stars prank comic Jamie Kennedy as an artist left to take care of his new son, who, because he was conceived when dad was wearing the crazy mask, has all the transformative CGI powers a \$74 million budget can buy.

It's loud, frantic, and a lot of the jokes misfire. But I do get a few chuckles from Looney Tunes-style cartoon anarchy, and

MICHAEL ADAMS

recent fatherhood disposes me more to jokes about kids sucking the life out of you. *Son of the Mask*, I think as I close my laptop, isn't so much a bad movie as it is a *bus* movie. It's how I think of the stupid but watchable family-friendly fare long-haul bus drivers play to keep their passengers pacified.

One month down, eleven to go, I drift off to sleep.

STATUS REPORT

Worst this month: *Search for the Beast*

Runners up: *It's Pat*, *Curse of Bigfoot*, *Another 9½ Weeks*

Guiltiest pleasure: *Howling II*

Movies watched: **35**