

## Movie Review: Tropic Thunder

Written by {ga=mitch}

Friday, August 29 2008 7:00 PM -

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For Mitch's latest assignment, we dispatched him out to the theaters to review &quot;Tropic Thunder&quot; for our readers. The film stars Stiller, Jack Black and Robert Downey Jr. as a group of prima donna actors making a Vietnam War film when their fed-up writer and director decide to abandon them in the middle of the jungle, forcing them to fight their way out. What did Mitch think of the film? Is it worth a trip to the cinema? Find out in his latest review for us ...



Making a satire about Hollywood is tricky business indeed. The first difficulty is finding the right balance in tone; making sure it's not so nasty as to appear bitter, but at the same time not so lame as to appear to be still sucking up to the Powers That Be. The second problem is how to truly make fun of Hollywood in a manner that most people would understand. The average ticket-buyer may have heard somewhere about the insider deals and quirky actions of the motion-picture industry, but have no real knowledge of the inner workings...and would therefore have no understanding of what is being ridiculed.

The last big-budget picture that attempted this was Arnold Schwarzenegger's &quot;The Last Action Hero&quot; in 1993. It bombed. The film cost \$85 million to make, and only grossed \$50 million at the box office. And the reason for that was simple...no one wanted to go to a Schwarzenegger movie to watch Ah-nuld poke nasty fun at the audience that has made him a millionaire and the Governor of California. &quot;See how stupid you are for liking these kinds of movies?&quot;, it seemed to be saying.

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This is why television seems to be the best media for doing these, especially if they come in the form of animation, like "The Simpsons", "South Park" or "Family Guy". They go completely over the top without any concern of the subjects they are ridiculing.

There is also HBO's great comedy "Entourage", that is lighter on satire, but still willing to show the games stars, studios, and agents play.

I think it is the success of "Entourage" that might have led to the greenlighting of "Tropic Thunder", as it tends to skewer some of the same targets...just using a much sharper and longer stick. And writer/director Ben Stiller and co-writer/producer Justin Theroux actually pull it off; mostly by keeping the barbs directed at the Hollywood insiders, and not at the audience enjoying the film. At the same time, they strike the same balance seen in "Entourage", by presenting the in-and-outs of the movie business in such a way as to not confuse or bore the audience.

It is not a slam on the film as a whole to say that the funniest part of the entire movie is the first ten minutes. During that time, you see an over-the-top "commercial" from a rap artist pimping the energy drink "Booty Sweat". You then get three trailers in a row from the last movie of each of the other three "stars" of the film.

They are all dead-on spoofs of the genre each "star" normally plays. Ben Stiller is Tugg Speedman, a Jean-Claude Van Damme action star without the martial arts skills, appearing in "Scorcher VI", a declining apocalyptic action series where each one is almost exactly the same as the last. Then Jack Black appears as Jeff Portnoy, a vicious knock-off of drug plagued overweight comic Chris Farley. His trailer is for "Fatties: Fart 2", where Portnoy goes like Eddie Murphy in the Klumps, playing every member of an obese family who love to pass gas.

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The final trailer is of Robert Downey Jr. in a "Fox Searchlight" film...which always means some artsy indie film with a limited audience and a chance for big awards. In fact, his Kirk Lazarus character is touted as a "five time Academy Award winner" in this trailer of a film about a 17<sup>th</sup> century monk dealing with being gay. Keep an eye out for the object of the monk's obsession...as it's an early gem of cameo casting.

The laughs keep going non-stop for another five minutes, as you get "Inside Edition" reports of where all three actors are at this point in their careers. Each one of them was hilarious, but the one about Lazarus and his "bad boy image" was the best, as of course Downey Jr. has no problem poking fun at his previous life style.

The three actors and the rapper (named Alpa Chico...and yes, as they say it, it sounds like Al Pacino), are onsite in Vietnam filming the big budget movie of a daring rescue mission from the Vietnam War, adapted from the book by Sgt. Four Leaf Tayback (Nick Nolte), a man who lost both of his hands during the "actual" event.

Directing the big budge spectacle is a first timer, played in perfect British frustration by Steve Coogan. He can't control his stars and their egos, hence the project is "one month behind schedule after only five days of shooting". The plug is about to be pulled by studio head Les Grossman (a hysterical Tom Cruise...more on that later) when Four Leaf proposes to the director to place mini-cams throughout the jungle, drop the five actors off (the previous four and the obligatory young kid), and let them improvise their way back under the watchful eyes of the cameras.

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However, things of course go horribly wrong, when they end up somewhere in Myanmar, and are stalked by a group of heroin processors who think the five are DEA.

The humor is very broad, with lots of slapstick, and no hesitation to get as gross as possible, nor as foul as possible, hence the well earned "R" rating. But as much as I normally don't get into gore in films, it actually works here, as almost all of it is "staged", showing overblown special effects being used on the movie-within-a-movie strictly for laughs at how some movies go so overboard on unrealistic battle effects. (Of course, the one time the grossness is supposed to be "real" is pretty cringe inducing).

Stiller and Theroux are to be given lots of credit, as they really don't care who they skewer...no one is safe. There are several times in the movie where they definitely cross the line in taste, but to be honest, I'd rather see them take the risks and therefore maybe overshoot once or twice, rather than play it safe and therefore make a boring movie.

The biggest outrage, and the biggest coup of this film is the use of Tom Cruise as Les Grossman...and he is one gross man, probably a send up of notorious megalomaniac Harvey Weinstein. Cruise gives his best performance in years in portraying a man with no hair on the top of his head, but an overabundance of it everywhere else on his body; a foul mouthed bully who loves nothing more than belittling people and using the f-word five or six times in every sentence. It is the one character in the film where no attempt is made to humanize him, and I was shocked at Cruise's skill in doing this type of parody.

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For the main actors, Robert Downey Jr. is leaps and bounds superior to the rest of the cast. As has been well documented, Downey's character is an Australian "method actor", a man so dedicated to his craft that he undergoes "controversial pigmentation treatment" to make his skin darker to play the African-American sergeant in the film, along with the wig, contact, and prosthetics, never once "dropping character", much to the chagrin of Alpa Chino ("What do you mean, YOU people!?").

Credit also goes to Stiller for not caving to pressure from the politically correct groups and altering the script regarding to the use of the word "retard". Once again, the protests come from people who have not seen the film.

The entire joke of this is about actors who deliberately seek out roles where they play handicapped people, in order to garner critical acclaim...such as Dustin Hoffman in "Rain Man", Daniel Day-Lewis in "My Left Foot", Tom Hanks in "Forrest Gump" or even Jack Nicholson and his obsessive-compulsive character in "As Good As It Gets". It's not the handicapped people who are being roasted here, but the narcissism of the actors who play them and their callous disregard of anything but "their craft". Downey's dissertation on the negative effects of going "full retard" in a role is brilliant writing and perfect delivery. To have changed one word of it would have made this a lesser film.

Stiller, as stated, does a wonderful job in the writing and directing of this film. Too bad he can't make it three-for-three, because his acting is by far the weakest of the five "soldiers". Seen one Ben Stiller performance? Then you've seen them all, including this one (although

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I'll make an exception for his exceptional work in &quot;The Royal Tennenbaums&quot;).

Matthew McConaughey was also pretty weak as Tugg's agent, Rick Peck. Maybe it's because I'm so spoiled by Jeremy Piven's shark-on-land agent Ari Gold in &quot;Entourage&quot;, that anything else pales in comparison. Jack Black also suffers a bit, mostly because there is not a whole lot he can do with his jonesing character other than rant and rave...although he does get some pretty funny lines in.

A lot of the comedy comes from the &quot;lesser&quot; stars, Brandon T. Jackson in his first major role as Chino, and Jay Baruchel (the youngest stoner friend in &quot;Knocked Up&quot;) as Kevin Sandusky, a young gamer just hoping to get laid as a reward for appearing in a movie with such big stars. These two serve as the &quot;everyman&quot; of the film, watching with increased incredulity and aggravation the war of egos raging all around them, overshadowing the real war going on.

All told, you have a movie that may not be a comic classic, but is a comic rarity; being totally fearless in its storytelling, refusing to go 'full retard' in the treatment of its audience. If it has a couple of misses for every several hits; then so be it...I'm happy to have watched it just the way it is.

**My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs)**