

All the 2008 Movies I Saw

by Joe Mulder

In what I just now decided will be an annual day-before-the-Oscar-nominations-come-out tradition, I will now rank all of the 2008 movies I have seen – either in the theater or on DVD – up to this point. I only saw 20 this year, due to the fact that I have a small daughter and the fact that these days I generally only make the effort to see a movie if I'm reasonably sure there's a good chance I'll really like it. Or if it's something I can take my kid to. For instance:

20. *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*

Maybe it helped to see the first one; I only went because my neighbor was taking her daughter, and invited my daughter and I along. The movie played like an off-brand *Lion King*, there was some old lady who could beat up lions, for some reason... I don't know. It seems like if you're doing this kind of movie you could make more of an effort to appeal to parents as well as kids; see items 9, 7 and 4 on this list.

19. *You Don't Mess With the Zohan*

The Reduced Shakespeare Company, in "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)," refer to certain of Mr. Shakespeare's works as "'The Apocrypha,' or in some scholarly circles, 'The Obscure Plays,' or 'The Lesser Plays,' or simply, 'The Bad Plays.'"

Now, I do not necessarily mean to compare Adam Sandler with William Shakespeare, but I must confess that I am a fan of his. Sandler, that is, more so than Shakespeare. And though I am a fan, I have to say that I see *Zohan* eventually being considered as part of the Sandler "Apocrypha," along with *Mr. Deeds*, *Little Nicky*, *The Longest Yard* and, possibly, *Big Daddy*.

(also, in this analogy, *50 First Dates* would be Adam Sandler's *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Waterboy* his *Macbeth*. And I'm going to take a wait-and-see approach before I decide what would be his *Hamlet*; I'd say *Billy Madison*, in which he actually delivers a soliloquy from *Hamlet*, but that seems too obvious. Plus, in *Billy Madison*, Bradley Whitford was really more of an Iago than a Laertes. So there's a lot to consider)

18. *Get Smart*

I watched *Get Smart* back-to-back with *Zohan* a little while ago, as I sat addressing Christmas cards (there were a lot of Christmas cards). It attracted my attention under my long-standing dictum that I will see any movie called – or starring – "The Rock." Like *Zohan*, it was a nice enough diversion to have on while one addressed Christmas cards.

17. *Burn After Reading*

If nothing else, *Burn After Reading* was remarkable for the performance of David Rasche, star of the quite possibly under-appreciated 1980s TV comedy "Sledge Hammer!" (I say "quite possibly under-appreciated" because I haven't seen "Sledge Hammer!" since I was 11, and you just can't know whether something you liked when you were 11 was actually good, or just good to an 11-year-old, at least not until you watch it again as an adult. This is known – I just decided – as *The Goonies* Conundrum).

Rasche plays a CIA bureaucrat whose deadpan reports to his superior, the almost-adequately appreciated J.K. Simmons, all but steal the movie. It's a remarkable performance from almost out of nowhere by a guy I hadn't seen in ages, a guy who, according to IMDb, has spent the last 20 years playing parts like "Lawyer" and "Amy's Dad." And then, all of a sudden, he's in a Coen brothers movie, hanging with – and maybe even outdoing – the likes of Clooney, Pitt and Malkovich. It was the acting equivalent of Dwight Gooden, after a decade-plus of drug abuse and arm trouble, throwing a no hitter for the Yankees in 1996 (only without the drug abuse and arm trouble. Presumably, anyway; I don't know that much about David Rasche).

As for the movie itself, I can't say I quite got it. But don't worry, Coen brothers: I'll still be first in line for your next one.

(actually, by whenever their next one comes out I will have two small children and very little time to see movies in the theater, so there is virtually no chance I'll be first in line. But it seemed like a nice thing to say)

16. *Horton Hears a Who!*

This one is remarkable to me only because it was the first time I ever remember knowing for certain that my daughter was following some aspect of a narrative storyline; at one point in the movie, a bird voiced by Will Arnett is menacing Horton, but is catapulted off of a tree and out of Horton's way. My kid, who had not quite turned two, asked me, more out of curiosity than concern, "What happen bird?" I told her he went away, and evidently that answer satisfied her because she didn't bring it up again.

15. *Tropic Thunder*

I thought the whole was somewhat less than the some of the parts; I'm a little burned out on the stupid-but-not-really-because-I'm-obviously-actually-smart brand of humor that seems to be Ben Stiller's *raison d'etre*. And while I'd concede as willingly as anybody that Robert Downey, Jr. is an incredible talent, I didn't see quite what all the fuss was about. Maybe I was just tired; I watched *Tropic Thunder* really late at night a few weeks ago because I wanted to get it back to Netflix right away the next morning. Not exactly the best circumstances under which to enjoy comedic satire, if I'm being honest with myself.

14. *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*

Maybe I liked *Zack and Miri* more than I otherwise would have because I saw it with my wife on our birthday (we have the same birthday); we dropped off the kid, saw the movie, and then went to The Melting Pot, a mind-blowingly good fondue restaurant in Thousand Oaks (among other places).

Incidentally, we'll see everything Kevin Smith puts out until either he dies or we do, because the day my wife and I met we clicked first and foremost over a shared affection for *Chasing Amy*.

Zack and Miri wasn't the greatest thing I've ever seen, but it was a worthy effort from the former Silent Bob, and the sex scene between Seth Rogan and Elizabeth Banks (spoiler alert, I guess, although not really, because duh, look at the title of the movie) ranks as one of the best I've ever seen on film. Incredibly well-acted, well-written, well-directed; that particular few minutes of *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* are among the best few minutes I saw in any movie all year.

13. *Pineapple Express*

A slight letdown if only because I happened to think the trailer was one of the best trailers in years. More than worth a watch, though.

12. *The X-Files: I Want To Believe*

My wife is, essentially, the Queen of the "X-Files" Nerds. For one, her name is Mrs. Mulder. So, right there. Also, she works at a restaurant where she once served "X-Files" creator Chris Carter and David Duchovny together at the same table; she claims that was the only time she got so star-struck she had difficulty doing her job. She then developed a rapport with Carter, always asking, "so when's the next movie coming out" when they'd see each other.

As part of the L.A. Film Festival last summer there was an event at which Carter, Duchovny, and "X-Files" writer and producer Frank Spotnitz fielded questions following an exclusive look at footage of the new movie. My wife and I went, she because of her "X-Files" obsession and me because where else was I going to go that evening? We waited outside the theater with the rest of the crowd for probably a good hour, and then they finally opened the doors. On our way in, we commoners were walked right past a red carpet setup where Carter, Duchovny and a few others were posing for pictures. Event staff made a point to tell everyone as they passed to keep moving along, get to your seats, don't disturb the famous people (and rightfully so; if everyone had stopped to gawk, we'd have been there for hours). As my wife and I filed past the red carpet area I saw Chris Carter notice her, before she even saw him. She turned his way, he gave her a smile and a wave of recognition, and she waved back. There was no official coronation ceremony, but if there had been, that's when it would have taken place. The title of Queen of

the "X-Files" Nerds was hers.

As for the movie itself, it was fine. It played like a particularly good 90-minute episode of the series; nothing groundbreaking, but undoubtedly a major thrill for big fans of the show (and, speaking for myself, a worthwhile experience for casual "X-Files" fans).

11. *Eagle Eye*

I'm not going to tell you that anything that happened in *Eagle Eye* was remotely plausible, and I'm certainly not going to tell you that I like what it portends for the future of America that a pipsqueak like Shia LeBeouf seems to have become his generation's biggest action star (though I've got nothing bad to say about his acting chops; I wanted not to think he was any good, but, dang it, I do). What I will tell you is that when my wife decided to take the kid along to a baby shower and I suddenly found myself with a free evening, and I figured, "hey, why don't I go have a few beers and see a movie? Any movie?", and that movie ended up being *Eagle Eye*, well, that was just what the doctor ordered.

10. *The Dark Knight*

At the risk of appearing contrarian just for the sake of it, I've got to say that I was apparently a great deal less blown away by *The Dark Knight* than almost everyone else was. Heath Ledger's Joker certainly represented an unforgettable villain, perhaps unrivaled in the genre, and what I took to be the movie's central theme – when fighting evil, how dark can one afford to become until one perhaps loses the light in oneself? – certainly resonated. But several major plot points just didn't make any bit of sense, and for that, *The Dark Knight* barely makes my personal Top Ten.

(something tells me that Christopher Nolan, Christian Bale, *et. al* will be able to handle that)

9. *Bolt*

Could it be that we're nearing the day when non-Pixar computer animated films might not be dismissed automatically as second-tier projects? We may be, if *Bolt* and *Kung Fu Panda* are any indication. *Bolt* featured a tight, well-written story, an excellent opening action sequence, a stroke of voice-casting genius in Susie Essman as Mittens the cat, and even a cameo from actor-comedian Nick Swardson (who is to movies what free snacks are to parties; any party/movie can only be so bad if, at the very least, there's free snacks/Nick Swardson).

8. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*

For as much as we saw Jason Segel's penis in this movie, you'd think maybe we could also have gotten some boobs. In any case, a highly recommended date comedy. And, although it's probably too late, I'd remind the Motion Picture Academy

that, according to the list they themselves have provided, the song "Dracula's Lament" from *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is eligible to be nominated for an Oscar.

Just a little something to think about.

7. *Kung Fu Panda*

I'd watch Jack Black read the phone book. And not even out loud, either. Just quietly, to himself.

6. *Step Brothers*

I realize it's not quite fair to take *Tropic Thunder* to task for its particular brand of humor and then rank *Step Brothers* this high on the same list. What can I say? I loved *Step Brothers*. At least the characters in *Step Brothers* were supposed to be unmotivated, unimpressive, unaccomplished ne'er-do-wells; when they did idiotic things, they had something of an excuse. And I'm sure it gets extra credit because I staggered upstairs at around 12:30 in the morning while staying at my aunt and uncle's house over Christmas break and a bunch of us watched *Step Brothers* all slap-happy from lack of sleep and holiday fatigue, but, damned if we didn't all laugh our asses off.

Also, *Step Brothers* was brought to another level of excellence by the presence of Adam Scott. Any movie, in fact, would be brought to another level of excellence by the presence of Adam Scott (that includes my own family's home videos, and any type of porn). I'm pretty sure that the only reason my wife and I are alive today is because Adam Scott was in *The Aviator*; if he hadn't been, we would have perished in some sort of grisly murder-suicide after sitting through about an hour-and-a-half of that film (which one of us committed the murder and which the suicide would have been largely academic, determined only by which one of us would have been the first to get hold of a weapon). In short: I'm in man-love with Adam Scott, and I don't care who knows it.

5. *The Hammer*

Speaking of man-love...

I think it's fair to say that I'm a passionate, devoted fan of Adam Carolla's morning radio program, but I wasn't sure that *The Hammer*, self-released boxing comedy, would live up to expectations. It did. Go and seek ye out my "Nine Most Under-Appreciated Films of My Lifetime" post on this very website to hear more about "The Hammer;" there's no point in me repeating myself here. The short version: excellent movie. See it.

4. *Wall-E*

If you're able to read this, then in all likelihood PoopReading.com co-creator Jamesom Simmons flew into

such a rage that he choked on his own sputum and lost consciousness *before* he could shut down this website permanently and UPS me a box of his own fecal matter, which I can only imagine would be his first and second impulses upon seeing that I ranked *Wall-E* as low as 4th on this list. What can I say? I just adored *Wall-E*, as everyone did, but I thought the gorgeous, poetic first half of the movie seemed, perhaps, just the slightest bit disconnected from the more conventional second half. Whatever recriminations such an opinion prompts from Mr. Simmons, I'll just have to endure.

Now, let's move on and finish the rest of the list as quickly as we can; I've got a home security system to install and personal food-tasters to hire.

3. *Frost/Nixon*

Just about once a year, I take a day off. Not from work, but from my family. I'll go eat dinner with just me and a nice book, I'll go play some cards at one of the L.A. area's many casinos, I'll do some shopping, I'll see a bunch of movies... this year, on the afternoon before my day off (my wife insists on calling it a "me day," which I don't think is particularly funny), I was clearing movies with her, making sure I wasn't going to see anything she wanted us to see together (make the "whip" sound effect if you must, but she does the same thing with me when she wants to go see a movie).

In any case, the reason I bring it up is because the three movies I had my eye on that day ended up being the top three movies on this list.

"*Frost/Nixon*?" I asked her.

"Political interviews from 30 years ago; yeah, you can see that one yourself."

"*The Wrestler*?"

I'm not sure she even felt the need to dignify that with a response.

"*Slumdog Millionaire*?"

"Now you're just making up movies," she said.

By the end of the night she had not only heard of *Slumdog Millionaire*, but had determined that we needed to see it together. And I'm glad she did, but we're getting ahead of ourselves; we're here to talk about *Frost/Nixon*.

I loved it. Loved it, loved it. I was riveted. Director Ron Howard and screenwriter Peter Morgan (who also wrote the play upon which the movie is based) do an amazing job of convincing us that both internationally recognizable TV personality-slash-playboy David Frost *and* former leader of the free world Richard Nixon had a massive, legacy-defining

stake in the outcome of these 1977 TV interviews. Michael Sheen as Frost and Frank Langella as Nixon make for the most worthy onscreen adversaries since Rocky Balboa and Apollo Creed, or at least Clu Haywood and Rick "Wild Thing" Vaughn; the wonderful supporting cast is rounded out by the likes of Sam Rockwell and Oliver Platt (if Nick Swardson is the movie version of free snacks, by the way, then Oliver Platt is the movie version of an open bar).

No matter what lofty status and measure of success certain people attain in life, it won't – it *can't* – be sufficient; they won't let themselves consider it so, nor will they let themselves believe that others do. *Frost/Nixon* is the story of two such characters, told with artistic precision by an acclaimed, accomplished director (and former sitcom star) who just might identify with that particular type of man.

2. *The Wrestler*

See professional wrestler Randy "The Ram" Robinson (Mickey Rourke), twenty years after his famous, career-making Pay-Per-View match against The Ayatollah. See him eke out a subsistence living plying his trade in union halls and high school gyms. See him return home to his run-down trailer...

See The Ram connect with Cassidy (Marisa Tomei), an aging stripper who, like him, grew accustomed to the life of one born beautiful and charming in a rich, free country. See them both powerless against the inevitability of the end of that life...

See The Ram at a sparsely attended trade show, peddling VHS tapes of his greatest matches and charging for photo ops with his Polaroid camera... in 2008.

See The Ram, ordered by doctors not to perform anymore, take a menial job at a deli counter. In that job, see his natural charisma unable to be contained. See him briefly excel in that modest existence. See it not be enough...

See him choose the only life he knows. Don't see him die alone; know, however, that he will.

See *The Wrestler*. For heaven's sake, whatever you do, see *The Wrestler*.

1. *Slumdog Millionaire*

Slumdog Millionaire is a rapturous fairy tale about a young man who emerges from conditions that are among the worst that human life has to offer, becomes richer than he ever could have imagined, and finds enduring love with the most beautiful woman in the world. Maybe I'm an easy target, but I found that appealing.

I'm not sure what, if anything, I can add to the praise that's being heaped on *Slumdog Millionaire* in certain circles; what

I am sure of is that it was the best movie I saw this year – the best movie, perhaps, that I've seen in many years.

And I'd say more, but I think, after twenty movies, I've said enough.
