

The Nine Most Under-Appreciated Films of My Lifetime

by Joe Mulder

Some time ago, a question was posed as to whether *Return To Me* was the most under-appreciated film of a certain person's lifetime. Unfortunately, I can't claim to share the question-poser's affection for that movie, but I can waste a bunch of my time and yours by compiling a list of my own.

Here, in no particular order (unless you count alphabetical), are The 9 Most Under-Appreciated Films of My Lifetime (November 1, 1977 - present).

Back to the Future, Part III (1990)

Some movies, you see them when you're a kid, you love them because you're a kid, you watch them a whole lot, and then some years pass, you don't watch them for a while, then, as an adult (or near-adult), you watch them again and you realize, with a twinge of disappointment, "Oh. This is not a good movie."

In this particular case, I'm referring to *Back to the Future, Part II*. The 1955 scenes are great, and the rest of the movie bad. It pains me to say it, but, it's true.

Part III, on the other hand, is, if you ignore a silly final minute or two (a flying locomotive? Nobody spoke up at any point and said, "maybe not a flying locomotive?"), a delight. Give it another chance, if it's been a while. And ignore the fact that Marty's great-great grandmother looks like Lea Thompson, even though she's from Marty's dad's side of the family.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)

A controversial inclusion on the list, given that it's a widely acknowledged classic? Perhaps. But I still don't think it gets the credit it deserves, because I still don't think that people understand that it's not really about a high school slacker who wants to take one more sick day before graduation and the principal who has one last chance to catch him; it's about a high school slacker who realizes that this is his last chance to save his best friend's future, even if he has to risk his own to do it.

Ferris knows what Cameron has to look forward to...

If things don't change for him, he's going to marry the first girl he lays. And she's going to treat him like shit, because she will have given him what he has built up in his mind as the end all, be all of our existence.

...and he knows he won't be there to help him...

We're going to graduate soon. We'll have the summer. He'll work and I'll work. We'll see each other at night

and on the weekends. Then he'll go to one school and I'll go to another. Basically, that will be it.

He's worried that Cameron will slink through life obeying his indifferent wife just like he's slunk through life obeying his indifferent parents, because that's what he's used to and he doesn't know anything different. Ferris needs to push Cameron to stand up to his parents, just so Cameron knows he's capable of standing up to somebody. The plan works a little too well for Cameron's dad's Ferrari's comfort, but we're left to assume that Cameron will ultimately be the better for it.

Plus there's all of the parts where Principal Rooney is trying to catch Ferris, there's Charlie Sheen at the police station, there's the scene with the snooty *maitre d'*... all the stuff that leads people to consider it one of the best comedies ever. Let's not forget about that stuff.

The Great White Hype (1996)

Excellent cast, excellent movie, excellent premise: nobody cares about boxing anymore, the undefeated champ's (Damon Wayans) fights aren't being bought on pay-per-view, but wait! The champ hasn't lost as a pro, but he lost one fight as an amateur, to Terry Conklin (now a grungy underground rocker in Cleveland). Let's get Terry out here to Las Vegas, have him get into shape, and stick him in the ring! White people will watch boxing again!

I'm not sure why *The Great White Hype* isn't up there with *Caddyshack*, *Bull Durham* and *Major League* in the sports comedy pantheon; I've always suspected it might be because of Damon Wayans, against whom I have nothing in general, but who is as miscast here as he would have been as Rod Tidwell in *Jerry Maguire* (a part for which some sources say he was considered). I'm not sure I can explain it, but, when you're an actor playing the heavyweight champion of the world, you should just have a certain... non-Damon-Wayans-esque quality about you. But everyone else, from Samuel L. Jackson to Peter Berg to Corbin Bernsen to Jon Lovitz to Cheech Marin to Jamie Foxx to John Rhys-Davies (not to be confused with Jonathan Rhys Meyers) to the incomparable Jeff Goldblum, delivers magnificently.

It's a fun movie, it's very quotable, it's got a great cast, it's appropriately cynical about everything that entertainment and sports have become... an under-appreciated film if there ever was one.

The Hammer (2008)

I'm a big, big, big fan of Adam Carolla. On the radio, anyway. I thought "The Man Show" was fun and I enjoyed the televised version of "Loveline" when it was on; other than that, most of what he's done on TV I can take or leave. But his is the best radio show I've ever heard, endlessly

hilarious and thought-provoking even as you listen to him rail against red left-turn arrows for quite literally the 100th time (because shouldn't somebody be railing against them? Really, shouldn't everyone?).

When he mentioned on his show in the summer of 2006 that he had co-written and was starring in his own movie, I wasn't sure what to expect. What we got, in the end, was *The Hammer*, a truly "independent" film – Carolla essentially put together the financing for the movie and released it himself when nobody else would, justifiably proud enough of the project not to want to see it relegated to straight-to-DVD status – and a crowd-pleaser that it's difficult to imagine anyone honestly disliking, no matter what they think of the lead actor (and I've found that people who claim not to like Adam Carolla haven't spent a lot of time listening to him on the radio. And, if they have, they almost always turn out to be the sort of uptight killjoy you'd have no interest in spending time with).

The Hammer is comparable to Carolla's radio predecessor Howard Stern's *Private Parts* in that people seemed surprised that a "shock jock" could be responsible for such a fun, warm-hearted romantic comedy. *The Hammer* has sports, sure; Carolla's Jerry Ferro is a construction worker and part-time boxing instructor who, on his 40th birthday, loses his construction gig but impresses a boxing trainer during an impromptu sparring session with a successful pro, leading to a shot at the US Olympic trials. The movie also has an incredibly well done – if standard – romantic arc, as Carolla meets and falls for a comely public defender in one of his boxing classes. In fact, "incredibly well done, if standard" almost sums up the movie entirely.

Almost. Except, you need to factor in the way the film completely captures the best and most entertaining parts of Carolla's radio persona (which, one suspects, differs very little from his *actual* persona); mix that with the incredibly well done – if standard – plot, and you've got the very definition of a crowd-pleaser: a surprising, her-prizing (thanks for that one, Grandpa Simpson) movie that's just as sure to make you laugh as it is to get you laid.

(although now that I think about it, "just as sure to make you laugh as it is to get you laid" could also apply to a movie like *Schindler's List*... but, as far as *The Hammer* goes, I mean it in the fun way)

Think of it like this: if *The Hammer* had been put together by some unknown Czech actor instead of the "other guy" from "The Man Show," if it were the underdog story of a slightly over-the-hill Czech construction worker trying to make the Czech Olympic boxing team, if the love interest was played by a realistically cute Czech actress and the movie was in Czech, with subtitles, and if everything else about *The Hammer* was exactly the same; well, you would have had to physically restrain the critics from places like "L.A. Weekly" and NPR from breaking into the projection booth and

attempting to dry-hump the actual film reel itself, they would have been so beside themselves with praise for the movie.

Adam Carolla himself said on several occasions during *The Hammer's* all-too-brief theatrical run that if anyone goes to see it and doesn't think it's "at least an 8," he would personally refund their money. I would imagine it's possible that there's somebody out there somewhere who wouldn't particularly enjoy the movie; that said, I am unaware of anybody ever taking Carolla up on his offer.

The Impostors (1998)

I sort of think of this as *my* movie. I rarely run into anyone else who's heard of it, let alone seen it, but some friends and I went and saw it when we were in college and we thought it was just about the funniest thing we had ever seen. Many subsequent viewings have confirmed this.

This movie was Stanley Tucci's follow-up to *Big Night*, which I think may have been over-praised, and since *The Impostors* was nothing like *Big Night* I think it was dismissed and ignored. It's an old-fashioned screwball comedy, a Marx-Brothers-style romp updated for the new millennium, with all the humor and none of that weird 1930s stuff that today's audiences aren't interested in anymore.

If you want ensemble casts, look no further. Steve Buscemi doesn't do it for you? Well, shame on you, first of all, but, don't worry, because there's Alfred Molina! And Tony Shalhoub! Richard Jenkins and Allison Janney as a con man-and-wife! Billy Connolly as an aggressively gay athlete (I'm still not clear, after seeing the movie several times, whether he's a wrestler or a tennis player, but no matter!) Campbell Scott, in a performance that is unlikely to be topped by him or anyone else, as a Teutonic security officer! Lili Taylor, for Heaven's sake! Isabella Rossellini! Woody Freaking Allen! Please don't embarrass yourself by saying that I need to go on, even though I easily could.

And, of course, you've got Tucci himself and the singularly brilliant Oliver Platt as two starving actors who end up stuck on an ocean liner with the very man they were wrongly accused of assaulting the night before.

I'll tell you what: watch until the cream puff scene in the bakery, and if you don't think that's one of the funniest things you've ever seen in your life, then I would encourage you to go out immediately and steal a bunch of money, use the money to buy a gun, and then murder everyone you don't like, because the eternal consequences of such actions could not possibly worry you, because neither God nor the devil is capable of damning a soul that does not exist in the first place, as yours clearly would not if the cream puff scene doesn't make you pee yourself with laughter.

And, if anything, I'm under-selling it.

The Ladykillers (2004)

I just watched this one recently, and it hasn't gotten any worse. If you've ever liked a Coen brothers film, or a comedy, or a Tom Hanks performance, I'm not sure what would stop you from liking this. It's funny all the way through, Tom Hanks completely disappears into what is probably one of his most difficult characters to date, and, as is typical of movies from the Coens, the music is fantastic.

Mission: Impossible III (2006)

This sequel had the misfortune to be released right at the apex of the Tom Cruise backlash, during the height of his couch-bouncing, psychiatry-poo-hooing nuttiness. That, and the fact that *Mission: Impossible II* wasn't anything to write home about, probably kept a few people away (*MI-3* made about \$133 million in box office, compared with \$215 million for 2 and \$180 million – in 1996 dollars, mind you – for the original). I'm sure I still wouldn't have seen it yet if it hadn't come on one of the movie channels during free preview weekend shortly after we got our new HDTV.

It's a shame, because for all of Tom Cruise's perceived Scientology silliness, he's still a big honking movie star who can put together a hell of a movie. And thanks in no small measure to his decision to bring *Alias* creator J.J. Abrams on board, *Mission: Impossible III* is probably the best big-budget action movie in many years. I repeat: *Mission: Impossible III* is probably the best big-budget action movie in many years.

In a huge (and welcome) departure from the first two movies, the story actually feels small: Cruise isn't in the field anymore, he trains prospective agents, and he's engaged to Michelle Monaghan. But Felicity (or whatever Kerri Russell's character's name is), one of Cruise's favorite trainees, got captured by bad guys; so Cruise, Maggie Q, Ving Rhames and Jonathan Rhys Meyers (not to be confused with John Rhys-Davies) go to Germany to rescue her. Then, they go to the Vatican to try to capture Phillip Seymour Hoffman. But he gets away and kidnaps Michelle Monaghan, so they go to Shanghai to try to rescue her. And that's pretty much it. There's some intrigue and some double-crossing, but it's all refreshingly easy to follow. The action sequences are expertly staged, the dialogue is very clever, the acting is great, the story is standard but engaging... don't be like me. Don't assume that two *Mission: Impossible*s were more than enough.

Rat Race (2001)

I'm not sure who could watch *Rat Race* and not enjoy it. It might be one of the least hip movies I've ever seen, and not every sequence is gangbusters, but certain moments, like Seth Green and Vince Vieluf trying to dismantle the airport tower, to name just one, are almost impossible not to laugh at even after seeing them multiple times.

I debated whether to include *Rat Race* on this list, because I think most people think it's funny and I thought it might in fact be sufficiently appreciated; but then it never really comes up when the Best Comedies of the Last Ten Years talk gets going. The movie is only seven years old, but it's difficult to imagine it being made today; comedies have changed. The Judd Apatow crowd wouldn't necessarily cotton to something like *Rat Race*, I'm afraid.

Nevertheless, funny is funny. And *Rat Race* is funny.

So I Married An Axe Murderer (1993)

I'm not really prepared to consider the opinion that this movie is anything short of a masterpiece.

You've got a mystery plot that could have formed the basis for a very good thriller, handled very well, in the middle of a hilarious comedy with Mike Myers at the height of his (considerably extensive, lest we forget) talents, Nancy Travis delivering a

Leon-Powe-in-Game-2-of-the-2008-NBA-Finals-caliber career performance from out of nowhere, great supporting turns from Amanda Plummer, Anthony LaPaglia, Alan Arkin, Brenda Fricker and Mike Myers himself, and memorable cameos from the likes of Steven Wright, Charles Grodin, Phil Hartman and Michael Richards.

What's more, it's the only movie I can think of – quite literally the only movie – whose plot twists actually ensure that it's enjoyable to watch twice for two different reasons: the first time because the effective twist ending takes you by surprise; and the second time because you now know, and can appreciate, why certain characters are acting the way they are. I heard someone say that if you watch *The Sixth Sense* again, and you consider what is revealed at the end, some of the stuff characters do doesn't make as much sense (I've only seen it once, so I can neither confirm nor deny); *So I Married An Axe Murderer* makes sense the first time you watch it and even more sense the second.

And if nothing else (and there's plenty else), the movie supplied us with any insult we would ever possibly need to use against people with large heads.
