

I (Heart) Huckabees

Studio publicists call it an “existential comedy,” and that describes as well as anything this odd melange of a movie called *I (Heart symbol) Huckabees*, a goofy send-up of contemporary American life by the iconoclastic American director David O. Russell, responsible for earlier fun houses like *Spanking the Monkey*, *Flirting with Disaster*, and *Three Kings*. If you can get into it at all, it can be downright amusing.

The film and its script (by Russell and co-writer Jeff Baena) almost defy synopsis (perhaps intentionally). Young, ineffectual environmentalist Albert Markovski (Jason Schwartzman) is troubled by coincidental encounters with a Sudanese doorman and consults two “existential” detectives, Vivian and Bernard Jaffe, (Lily Tomlin and Dustin Hoffman). She handles the Facts of a Case while he questions the Existence of it All, using tried-and-true techniques like zipping his stunned client into a garment bag. Albert also sees his small eco-world threatened by the burgeoning success of the rapacious store chain Huckabees (Fuddruckers crossed with Wal-Mart interbred with Applebees?), whose hot shot executive Brad Stand (Jude Law) is co-opting his environmental message. Brad also hires the Jaffes to analyze his seemingly perfect life which includes his live-in girlfriend Dawn Campbell (Naomi Watts), who is also the omnipresent “Voice of Huckabees” in all media. Then throw into the mix a befuddled fireman Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg) who teams up with Albert to find his bliss along with the Jaffes’ nemesis Catherine Vauban (Isabelle Huppert), a mysterious French radical. Whoa!

All these sometimes tart, sometimes spaced characters bounce off one another--changing alliances and views at whim--like steelies rolling in a pin ball machine. If the script had more Borscht Belt schtick, it might be mistaken for middle-period Mel Brooks. There is no point in unraveling what there is of a plot; the point in watching is seeing how these variegated players play off each other.

The casting is clever: Schwartzman, an earnest doofus, is a grown-up version of his ambitious adolescent in *Rushmore*; Hoffman, in a dusty gray mop-top, prattles effectively as an existential optimist; Tomlin is all nervous business as an overdressed gal out of the 1940’s; Watts is, for a change, a ditz as well as beautiful; and Wahlberg does nicely as a lower-middle class enthusiast whose mind holds thoughts about as long as a colander holds liquid. Perhaps most surprising is Jude Law as Brad, a mercurial and smilingly cynical hustler with teeth so gleaming and skin so bronzed that he looks like he was computer-generated. If anything, he is more waxen here than in the current fantasy *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*.

The picture is built in a tumble of vignettes, some of them very funny. A wonderful scene ensues when Albert comes to dinner at the home of his Sudanese acquaintance, himself sponsored in the U.S. by a seemingly charitable, yet diabolically Christian family. The way the family takes apart the too-serious, liberal Albert is hilarious. Not so funny is another scene where Albert and Catherine fall into some slimy love-making in a mud pit. Their caking of each other goes on way too long.

But that’s the way *I (Heart) Huckabees* is, rather hit and miss. How much it hits will depend on one’s sensibility for the quirky, and if one sequence doesn’t amuse, just wait a sec for the next one down the line...

(October 2004)

