Movie Review: 'Drillbit Taylor'

by James Hebert

Its title sounds like an open invitation for a "more excruciating than root canal" joke.

But no need to grasp for cheap laughs, even if that's what "Drillbit Taylor" spends a good chunk of its 102 minutes doing. If anything, the movie - in which a parade of people gets their teeth knocked in - is more likely to make your molars ache with a case of the cutes.

'DRILLBIT TAYLOR' - Owen Wilson stars in the comedy 'Drillbit Taylor.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) The story is something like "The Pacifier" aspiring to be "Fight Club" (a movie that's actually invoked here for a pretty good gag): Three geeks hire an allegedly deadly bodyguard to protect them from a couple of high school thugs.

They land Drillbit Taylor (Owen Wilson) on the cheap, and get what they pay for: He's a Malibu bum who's more interested in fleecing than policing and whose fists of futility couldn't batter a fish stick.

All kinds of things are wrong with this picture, starting with the "homelessness is adorable!" trope and proceeding to all the beat-downs that are played for laughs.

But it seems pointless to natter on about what's essentially slapstick - not to mention pretty modest compared to the video-game likes of Halo 2.

Just to be safe, the movie issues a pre-emptive strike at the idea of pop culture corrupting kids. After one of the nerds, wannabe playah Ryan (Troy Gentile), nearly gets the rap beaten out of him for insulting the chief bully in a hip-hop showdown, his buddy says he just knew that kind of music promoted violence.

It's a little weird to see Wilson in such a coolly amusing role, only his second screen appearance since his not-so-funny troubles last summer, when he wound up in the hospital after what was said to be a suicide attempt. (He's been lying low during the "Drillbit" publicity push.)

Wilson cruises through the movie with a comic nonchalance, unflappable even as he grabs a Samurai sword by the blade and stacks up more cover stories than the ex-governor of New York.

The kids are funny and pretty fearless in embracing their geekery, from the tubby Ryan to the twiggy Wade (Nate Hartley) to the pee-wee Emmit (David Dorman), who can't leave the house without a Broadway-show logo on his clothes.

And Alex Frost is suitably menacing as Filkins, the bully whose Eddie Haskell vibe snows all the grown-ups, although you have to wonder what universe these schoolkids are living in where gratuitous violence barely merits a visit to the principal.

Though Steven Brill ("Mr. Deeds") directs, Judd Apatow - the comedy kingpin who's among the movie's producers - puts his fistprints on this one. Like "Knocked Up," "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story" and Apatow's other movies, it matches mild shock value with a sweetness that's slathered on thick but still can get under the skin.

It's a movie that makes bloody revenge seem like another Wii game, and ain't that a kick in the teeth.

"Drillbit Taylor." Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 stars.

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