

Movie Review: 'Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay'

by Lee Grant

Just by watching it, "Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay" gives off a comedic contact high.

Not only is it a funny stoner comedy, but it coolly takes on contemporary politics, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and stereotypical depictions of Asians and other minority groups (be prepared black people, Jewish people, Southern white people).

'HAROLD & KUMAR ESCAPE FROM GUANTANAMO BAY' - Girls are a goal for pot-smoking pair John Cho (left) and Kal Penn, the Harold and Kumar of the comedy 'Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jaimie Trueblood / New Line Cinema. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) There was a kind of reefer madness at an AMC preview in San Diego this week, with any depiction or mention of marijuana causing a general eruption of whoops and hollers in the packed house.

Harold (John Cho), the strait-laced accountant, and Kumar (Kal Penn), the bright slacker who at any time could enroll in med school, pick up their adventures following 2004's "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle," a so-so performer at the box office, a huge hit on DVD. Both films are significant in that the leads are played by Asian-American actors.

From the beginning, this crowd was blistering. There were free T-shirts with a certain green plant on them tossed into the audience. Beach balls with the "Harold & Kumar" logo bounced off heads, if you get what we mean.

When the lights went down, and the movie barely started to the strains of Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World," a tone was set by this shout from down front, "(Expletive), yeah!"

The movie opens with a scene in a bathroom, something about all the White Castle burgers just ingested. From there, it pretty much sticks to bodily function humor, some of it funny, some lame.

The men are getting ready to take off for Amsterdam, where the girl Harold fell in love with is on vacation. Their arrival was going to be a surprise. At the airport, they run into trouble at security after Kumar is pulled out for further inspection. He's belligerent, believing that racial profiling is behind it. His tete-a-tete with a black officer is amusing.

Once on the plane, they're mistaken for terrorists after passengers confuse the bong Kumar smuggled onboard for a bomb.

On the ground, they're sent to the Guantanamo Bay detainment camp, site of the real scandal over torturous treatment of inmates. There's no torture of Harold and Kumar, though there is a near-miss from forced oral copulation. Oh, please, it's played for laughs. The two escape, making their way to Miami by raft with others fleeing Cuba.

On the road, there's a stop at the shack (at least from the outside) of a Southern redneck played with verve by "Last Comic Standing" winner Jon Reep, an inbred hillbilly right out of "Deliverance."

Later, who should pick them up on the side of the road but Neil Patrick Harris (huge roar from the crowd), reprising his role from the first film in which he plays himself, a drugged-out sex maniac who still taps his "Doogie Howser, M.D." notoriety. "I was able to perform an appendectomy at 14," he says. "I think I can handle a couple of 'shrooms," as he speeds down the road, stoned. And stick around through the credits for a final scene with Harris.

In the meantime, Kumar's former girlfriend is marrying into a rich Texas family, close to President and Mrs. Bush. Kumar and the president share their deep hurt (and something to smoke) at the expectations of their fathers forcing them into careers they didn't seek.

There's plenty of sex. "The gratuitous nudity," said Penn, "is nothing more than gratuitous nudity." This audience loved it and these guys.

Afterward, outside the theater, Vu Do, 24, a freelance animator from San Diego, said the film "was as good as the first one. You can relate to the chemistry. It doesn't matter if you're Asian. Growing up today, no matter what you are, you can relate."

Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

"Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay." Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated: R. 3 stars.

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