

John Cho is in trouble again in 'Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay'

by Joey_Berlin

John Cho reprises his role as the straight-laced stoner Harold in the raunchy and satirical sequel "Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay."

JOHN CHO - John Cho and Kal Penn are in trouble again in 'Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jamie Trueblood. The dopey original 2004 pothead comedy "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle" was not a huge blockbuster, but has remained popular on DVD. In the more politically minded new follow-up, Cho and his buddy, played by Kal Penn, get shipped off to Guantanamo Bay by Homeland Security when their bong is mistaken for a bomb. After escaping, they go on an excellent adventure from Florida to Texas to clear their names, with lots of wacky characters - and wacky weed - along the way.

For Cho, the role of Harold has led to increased visibility after numerous small roles in films such as "Wag the Dog" and "American Beauty." His first breakthrough was a supporting role in the 1999 comedy "American Pie."

Since first playing Harold, the 35-year-old Los Angeles native and UC Berkeley graduate has been featured on numerous television shows, including a stint on "Ugly Betty." He will next be seen as young Mr. Sulu in the hotly anticipated "Star Trek" prequel.

Q: Is there anything that you guys would not do in "Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay" for the sake of comedy?

A: Apparently nothing. That's what I'm gathering, from the fool I've made of myself. Yeah, we've gone pretty far and I feel like, if there's a line I've probably already crossed it. But I do feel that the movies are pretty good-natured and have a good attitude about them. The sexuality isn't really pervy. Or, it is pervy in a very adolescent, boyish way.

You know, I'd rather be doing this than making some of the other product that's coming out of Hollywood. And as long as it's funny, I think that I'll go for it.

Q: Are you a fan of this kind of comedy? Is this the kind of movie that you would choose to go see?

A: I certainly wouldn't do it if it didn't have the content that it does. I feel like it's a smart movie as well as broad and gross. So I'm not a fan of the genre just for the sake of being broad and gross.

Q: After the first film you got a bigger fan base and were probably recognized more. How did it change your life?

A: Yeah, it's sort of par for the course. You know, I've been in the public eye since "American Pie" I suppose. Every day of my life somebody's yelling something at me. Now it's "Harold!" So it's good. They used to yell "milf!" Which isn't a name. Harold is a name, so it's a step up.

Q: There is a "bottomless" party scene in the film, in which almost everyone is half-nude. What was that day of filming like?

A: It's the strangest day, I'll tell you that much. It's weird. It's thrilling on a boyish level, and it's also work, and it's also surreal and uncomfortable. I mean, you get a roomful of clothed people and half of them take their clothes off, it gets weird. If you're not nude too, it's hard to see the sexuality of it. It's like a doctor's office. Somebody's got a coat on and somebody's got their clothes off. You just have lines and you say them. But, yeah, it's distracting. It's weird. It's the most distracting thing there is, nudity.

Q: You earned a degree in English and actually taught for a while in high school. When did you realize you wanted to try acting?

A: Well, I had moved down to Los Angeles with the intention of becoming an actor, and I was teaching during the day. I taught two classes in the morning and I was doing plays at night. And that was the hardest year of my life, I'd say. It was the hardest job I'd ever had, teaching seventh and 10th graders.

Q: Why is teaching the hardest thing you have ever done?

A: Because it's the most important thing I've ever done. The responsibility of it is overwhelming to the point of paralysis, almost, for me. You know, you're responsible for these kids and you're constantly thinking, "I'm messing up their minds. I'm doing this wrong. I'm not teaching them well. I'm not going to leave them better than I found them."

It's very, very stressful, so I have the utmost respect for people who do it.

Q: Have you found that there is still a degree of stereotyping with Asian-American characters in Hollywood, which you have to fight?

A: Yes and no. I do feel that there's some shift that's happening. Although having said that, I do feel like the progress isn't nearly where it needs to be. But I notice a lot of Asian-Americans in television commercials right now, which is encouraging because they're trying to sell us something. If they're trying to sell us soda or detergent, it means they're likely going to try to sell us entertainment at some point, which is good.

On the other hand, there's a lot of cosmetic progress as well. There are more of us on television, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the quality of roles has increased. Just because there are more receptionists that are Asian at the E.R. on a show doesn't necessarily mean that we've made narrative progress.

Q: What George Takei did, playing Sulu in the original "Star Trek," was landmark back then. Does that make taking his role in the new film something special for you?

A: Yes it was landmark, and absolutely it does. At least it gives it a measure of personal significance to me. I'm very pleased to be associated with that role because it meant so much to me growing up.

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