

DVD Select: Can't beat the heat, or the laughs, in 'Hot Fuzz'

by Robert_J_Hawkins

What's changed in five months? I attended a screening of the action/comedy/horror/buddy cop movie "Hot Fuzz" (Universal, 3 stars) and thought, "Well, that was pretty amusing. I wonder what's for dinner?"

'HOT FUZZ' - Simon Pegg and Nick Frost are small-town cops caught in big-city action in the action comedy 'Hot Fuzz.' CNS Photo courtesy of Rogue Pictures. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin The other night I reluctantly re-watched the movie on my little Toshiba portable DVD player and I was laughing like a lunatic. I felt like I'd missed half the movie in the first go around - the better half.

But it's the same movie, yeah?

I think it came down to attitude. "Hot Fuzz" is by the same crew that did the overappreciated zombie/comedy "Shaun of the Dead" - director-writer Edgar Wright, co-writer/star Simon Pegg and actor Nick Frost.

To this day, I don't "get" "Shaun of the Dead" as much as my friends and kids do. And, yeah, that annoys me. I want in on the joke. What I mostly saw was dumb jokes by juvenile writers and actors. My kids (and colleagues) saw hilariously dumb jokes by savvy young writers and actors.

So, yeah, I entered the theater with an attitude, daring Wright and Pegg to make me laugh. It probably didn't help that I watched the movie with a room full of Third Wave fans - those who are mostly clueless about movies, craving passive entertainment. These people aren't even aware of the existence to "other-movie references," they don't get irony and they get skittish when a movie goes non-linear.

Third Wavers don't fill a theater with laughter unless the jokes are broad, obvious and sufficiently set up by the action on-screen. They don't show up for a movie until the box office returns validate it.

First Wavers love movies. They love arcane references to other movies. They take risks. Irony is like catnip. Insider jokes are Easter eggs.

If you can't watch a movie with a room full of First Wavers, watching it alone and free of distractions is the next best thing.

Well, watching "Hot Fuzz" again bridged the humor gap. I get it. It cracks me up and, believe me, I haven't begun to peel all the layers off this onion.

Wright and Pegg love movies. It comes out in their humor. It comes out in their story. It comes out in the actors they chose to fill their movie.

In "Hot Fuzz" Pegg is a double A-type, tightly wired, by-the-book London cop named Nick Angel who approaches his job with a passion and discipline and rigidity that annoys the heck out of his colleagues. Simply put, he makes them all look bad.

His superiors - cameos by heavyweights Martin Freeman, Bill Nighy and Steve Coogan - reward him with a reassignment to the sleepy little village of Sanford for nine months. Or two years.

Angel arrives in Sandford with all the diplomacy of a bulldozer in Gaza. The first night in town he locks up a drunk, only to discover that the drunk is his new partner Danny Butterman (pudgy Nick Frost) and the son of the local chief inspector Frank Butterman (a grandfatherly Jim Broadbent).

It gets worse. Or better, depending on your perspective.

Whereas everyone else sees Sandford as England's most beautiful village - elected as such for many years - Angel sees something terribly wrong. For one thing, there are all these fatal accidents. And then there is the kind-of-vacant Stepfordish pleasantness that permeates the local leading citizens.

With the earnest but nearly hopeless Danny at his side, Nick Angel begins to look into the deeper darker secrets of Sandford. What he ends up with is open warfare against a most surprising opponent.

During a post-film Q and A, Simon Pegg once explained the film's trajectory this way: "The film willfully becomes dumber and dumber as it goes along." Maybe he was half-kidding. It gets more and more absurd even as the action scenes kick into high gear. That can leave you euphoric, dizzy, giddily confused - hey, "Hot Fuzz" is a legal high.

If it is dumber, it is calculatingly dumb and artfully calibrated to extract more and more laughs out of the audience.

There are also so many great characters in the film - the two juvenile detectives (Paddy Considine and Rafe Spall) who yap in unison like a nasty pair of Yorkies; the towering Lurch-like henchman Michael (Rory McCann); and the terribly slick market owner Simon Skinner (Timothy Dalton). There are two uncredited cameos worth noting: Cate Blanchett as Angel's ex-girlfriend and director Peter Jackson as a knife-wielding Santa Claus.

The DVD extras are the usual trope of deleted scenes, outtakes and brief little film sketches. The best of the lot is a really long video of the Pegg-Frost-Wright whirlwind U.S. promo tour for the movie. If you suspected they were a touch crazy from watching their films, this will validate it.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"300" (Warner, 3 stars) If you think war sucks today, you should have been there in 480 B.C on the Greek shores of Thermopylae where 300 battle hardened Spartans held off the thousands led by conquering god-king Xerxes. Filmmaker Zack Snyder has taken the graphic novel of Frank Miller and spun a moody, atmospheric, gory, stunning vision up on the screen. The movie is a disturbing other-world blend of live action and computer animation (no way all those guys walk around with washboard abs). The combat is brutal and graphic but the animated quality encourages a meditation on violence rather than voyeuristic hunger for it. The heck with the critics - they mostly hated it. See for yourself.

"Everything's Gone Green" (Vivendi/First Independent, 2 stars) A small comedy about making it big that asks the question - How much is too much? Also a nifty travelogue for underappreciated bits of Vancouver. Its biggest drawing point is that "Generation X" author Douglas Coupland crafted the script.

"Yellow" (Sony, 2 stars) Puerto Rican dancer Amaryllis (Roselyn Sanchez) moves to New York City to make her mark and ends up working in a strip club to get by. She also falls for a young doctor (D.B. Sweeny) who offers her security and love. When her career on Broadway suddenly begins to take, Amaryllis finds she must make a hard choice in her life.

And all the rest: Norse battle action in "Pathfinder"; true story of sex and murder "Lonely Hearts" stars James Gandolfini, Salma Hayek, John Travolta and more; family-friendly "Firehouse Dog"; out-of-this-world documentary "Roving Mars"; documenting our oil addiction in "A Crude Awakening"; and Winona Ryder and Joseph Fiennes team up in the mystery comedy "The Darwin Awards."

IT CAME FROM TV

Season seven of Texas greed-and-lust fest "Dallas"; second season of aloha detectiveness in "Hawaii Five-O"; stranded in Moonbase Alpha in the 30th anniversary edition of "Space: 1999"; and the complete 1968 animated series "Archie."

FROM THE VAULTS

"Invasion of the Body Snatchers" (MGM, 1978) You were right to think those people a little weird. Aliens have been quietly taking over the human race in this Philip Kaufman sci-fi horror masterpiece.

"20 Million Miles to Earth" (Sony) celebrating 50 years of stop-motion animation genius Ray Harryhausen's sci-fi classic in which a giant reptile savages Rome.

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