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-Richard Schickel, TIME MAGAZINE



only human

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FILMCLIPS



ONLY HUMAN

To the list of sentences that have probably never been uttered in prior human history, you can add "There's a duck in the bidet!" which appears in the Spanish comedy *Only Human* (*Seres Queridos*). It arrives onscreen this weekend after a delay of a few weeks from its originally scheduled opening, just in time for the more fervid among you to note rather a lot of similarities to *Little Miss Sunshine*. Both are tales of dysfunctional families featuring a lost-in-fantasy young girl, a more seriously obsessed teen brother and a grandfather who urges his grandson to sow more wild oats. Oddest of all, both films were directed by a husband and wife team, a rare category indeed. (I can't think of any others.)

Only Human's comic engine is driven by the arrival of daughter Leni (Marián Aguilera) with her fiancée Rafi (Guillermo Toledo) in tow. The family is Jewish, and though Leni has told everyone that Rafi is an Israeli, that's only technically true: he's Palestinian. That cat remains in the bag about as long as the duck in the bidet, and while the young lovers claim to be unbothered by their differences, less so mother Gloria (Argentine star Norma Aleandro, barely changed from 1985's *The Official Story*) and teen brother David (Fernando Ramallo), who is going through an Orthodox phase ("Don't touch me," he bleats when his sister tries to hug him, "you could be menstruating!").

What sounds like a heart-warming journey of family discovery thankfully veers off into light-weight slapstick, set into motion by the eager-to-please Rafi's clumsiness with a hunk of soup. Refreshingly free of religious and ethnic stereotypes, *Only Human* is at its best when it stays in a screwball vein. Brightly colored (just this side of garish) in the manner of all post-Almodovarian Spanish comedies, it stumbles only when the screenplay slips back into family therapy mode halfway through the third act, by which point it had made me laugh enough to overlook its attempt at uplifting my spirit.

—m. faust



LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

The finale of *Little Miss Sunshine* made me laugh so hard that it brought tears to my eyes, which was not the case with the rest of the film. I thought at the time that if ever a movie was redeemed by its ending, this was it. In retrospect I don't think that's the case: This is a too-often sloppy movie that slacks off just because it knows it has a killer ending in store. It also counts on a terrific cast to take up far too much of that slack.

Set on the road between Albuquerque and Redondo Beach (locations undoubtedly chosen on the assumption that audiences find the names inherently laughable), *Little Miss Sunshine* puts the troubled Hoover family in close quarters for a few days and dares us to believe that they might not survive the ordeal. These include father Richard (Greg Kinnear), trying to make a living as a motivational speaker and author despite no apparent qualifications for either job; wife Sheryl (Toni Collette), whose first marriage ended in divorce; son Dwayne (Paul Dano), who scowls at the world from under a giant poster of Nietzsche and has vowed not to speak until—well, until the end of the movie, anyway; Sheryl's brother Frank (Steve Carrell), a suicidal Proust scholar; and Richard's profane, substance-abusing father (Alan Arkin, who manages to put a fresh spin on an extremely clichéd character).

A hit at the Sundance Film Festival, *Little Miss Sunshine* uncomfortably treads a line between realism and farce. We can't really laugh at these characters because their problems and pains are all too real. When daughter Olive (Abigail Breslin) gets a last-minute slot in a regional talent show 900 miles away, it comes at the worst possible time for her financially strapped parents. That they take her the only way they can, in a barely-mobile VW bus, wins them enough grace in our eyes for us to put up with their less fine qualities. But the movie has too many rough edges to ignore, just as it resorts too often to inventing improbably despicable characters as a shorthand way of building sympathy for the Hoovers. For a movie that wants to preach the message that winning isn't everything, it lacks the nerve to let us see any of its characters as losers.

—m. faust



PULSE

Japanese horror films, known as J-horror, have almost singlehandedly rescued genre fans from a quagmire of American remakes and sequels. They tend to feature pasty-faced ghosts (usually children with pitch-black eyes and solemn expressions) and an unbearable fatalism. They're doubly unsettling for US audiences because their foreign setting makes it difficult to tell if their ambiguity stems from the supernatural or merely an alien culture. Hollywood, smelling a trend, is recycling them with blonde actresses like Naomi Watts and Sarah Michelle Gellar—heaven forbid discerning moviegoers should endure the subtitled originals. With *Ringu* and *Ju-On* already remade as *The Ring* and *The Grudge*, it was inevitable that some progressive studio would also regurgitate *Kairo*, which has garnered a following here.

Pulse is the handiwork of Dimension Films, the folks responsible for six *Children of the Corn* sequels and for running the *Hellraiser* and *Halloween* franchises into the ground. I've never seen the original *Kairo*, but I wish I had. I thought viewing the Americanized version without any preconceived notions would better enable me to evaluate its merits. Unfortunately, I had absolutely no idea what was going on for the entire running time of the picture. It seems to have been fashioned for people with phobias of the Internet, cell phones and laundry machines, and for reasons I can't fathom, these devices serve as a gateway to our world for hordes of bald ghosts that spread like the Avian flu.

Kristen Bell from *Veronica Mars*, Ian Somerhalder from *Lost* and Ron Rifkin from *Alias* are on hand to remind us that better material can now be found on TV than at the local multiplex. *Pulse* was shot with a bleached film stock that makes each character appear to have blue or green skin; there's an interracial couple in the mix, but you'd never know it looking at them. Wes Craven is credited with co-writing the screenplay, but there's no telling how many people had a hand in re-editing the final product, standard operating procedure for Dimension fare. This choppy mess is muddled and incoherent, lacking even the rudimentary logic of a video game, which it resembles.

It's obvious why Dimension didn't screen this for critics, who feel compelled to warn their readers away from such hackwork. If nothing else, I now want to see *Kairo* on DVD just to understand the plot.

—greg lamberson

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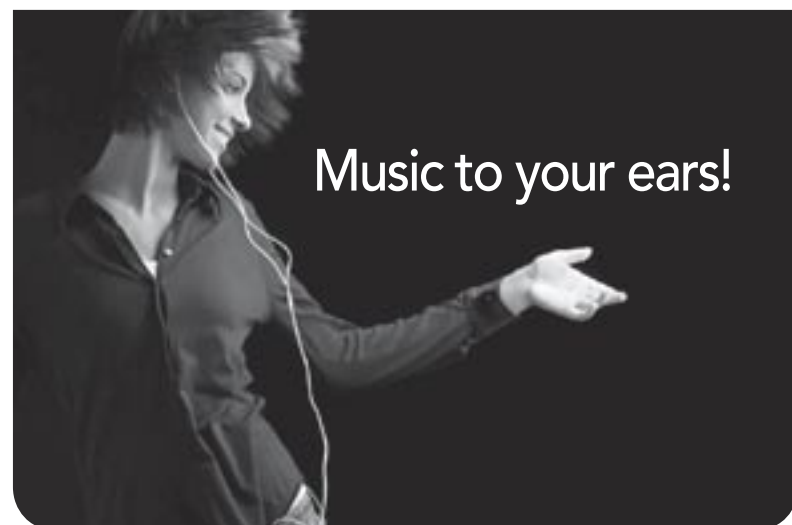
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