

Direct comedy hits make up for misses in 'Spy Who Shagged Me'

BY SAMUEL MCKEWON
Film Critic

The "Austin Powers" series has never been an entire movie as much as a filmed concept. Twists and turns in the plot are meaningless.

The second installment in what may be at least a three-movie deal proves it. "Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me" loses all pretension of making sense, choosing the path of absolute silliness and abundant bathroom humor.

Not that mass audiences care, nor did I. The sequel to first "Austin" does exactly what it was supposed to do: raise the bar on crass, ridiculous comedy, at the expense of a few critics, but hardly at the expense of the fans.

In short, Mike Meyers and Co. is still high on the funny meter; there's enough great moments in "The Spy Who Shagged Me" to drown away the bad ones. The second movie misses more often but hits better. While it isn't as consistent in its humor, the laughs come harder.

The basic premise picks up after the first "Austin" with the dashing 1960s rogue spy Powers (Meyers) celebrating a honeymoon with his wife, Vanessa (Elizabeth Hurley), who turns out to be a fembot.

The affectionately effeminate Dr. Evil (Meyers again) is returning back to Earth after a short orbit. His plan to destroy Austin: to go back to 1969 (through a swirly time machine) and steal his "mojo," a Kool-Aid type substance that turns any man into a shag machine and robs Austin of his manhood.

In fact, much of the movie is spent with Dr. Evil, much more than Powers, largely because of the brilliant new characters in the form of Mini-Me (Verne D. Troyer), a dwarfish clone of the arch villain and Fat Bastard (Meyers, Part III), the gross Scottish spy who actually does the mojo-stealing.

Austin, surrounded by the same brittle British actors, doesn't get the same help from the script, co-written by Michael McCullors and Meyers. Austin is shipped back to the past, where he's hip again, eliminating much of the broad fish-out-of-water humor that made the first film so successful.

Instead of a game Hurley tagging along, Heather Graham steps in at the American spy who shags, Felicity Shagwell. And not one good line is she given. A vixen without vix, Graham doesn't have natural humor in her bones and can't

pull off British weariness with a Midwestern accent. She is more of an obligatory female than cohort; in fact, before she disappears from the screen, Hurley fires off a few barbs better than any Graham gets.

Austin, meanwhile, seems subdued, and much of the schlocky humor is thrown back at Dr. Evil, fleshed out here better than the original movie. A musical duet with Mini-Me, a riff on the phrase "Zip it!", a double play on words about his phallic ship: these are the best scenes in the "Spy Who Shagged Me."

The script is filled with gags, but a plot seems far off in left field. The door is left gaping open for sequel; let's hope a better plan devised than one revolving around an eight-inch beaker of red fluid. Through a

revelation later in the movie, it all seems a bit stupid.

But hindsight isn't needed in "The Spy Who Shagged Me." Don't think, just laugh. And for that, Meyers and director Jay Roach delivers in spades; we don't care that the movie is one-sided in its laughs, nor does it matter that Graham's character falls a bit flat. In the end, it's still damn funny and the funny lasts with you outside of theater; just imagining Mini-Me in his mini chair is hilarious.

Solid cast helps rescue 'Daughter'

BY CLIFF HICKS
Film Critic

I'll confess that I went into "The General's Daughter" with a bit of hesitation. The trailer didn't look incredibly gripping, the plot sounded predictable and director Simon West's last film, "Con Air," was a lot of good pieces that never really added up to more than to a mediocre movie.

It's nice to be wrong every so often.

"The General's Daughter" is a nice, solid thriller that depends mostly on performances and

The Facts

Title: "The General's Daughter"
Stars: John Travolta, Madeline Stowe, James Cromwell, Timothy Hutton, James Woods
Director: Simon West
Rating: R (graphic sex/violence)
Grade: B
Five Words: Flashy, but sharp and solid

a reasonably well-written screenplay. Based on the book by Nelson DeMille, the story centers on the death of Capt. Elizabeth Campbell (Leslie Stefanson) and the investigation into that death.

Unlike your traditional cop flick, however, everything here is strictly military. It's a military murder, so they bring in a military cop. The Criminal Investigations Division sends Warrant Officer Paul Brenner (John Travolta) to find the killer.

Lots of little things bog the investigation down, however. The Captain has a mysterious background, her body is found naked tied to tent stakes, everyone on the wants this dealt with in a hurry as the FBI will come in and take over in three days and ... oh yeah, did I mention she's the daughter of the general of the base (James Cromwell), who just retired and is considering running for Vice President?

The film is helped immensely is Carter Burwell's fantastic score. A blend of old southern recordings and trip-hop beats, the music is a great blend of soulful sounds and catchy rhythms.

The fact that West gathered a real ensemble cast helped too. While Travolta puts on a good performance, as do Cromwell, Madeline Stowe as Travolta's partner and Timothy Hutton.

The show stealer, however, is James Woods, who plays the murder victim's boss at the Psychological Operations department on the base. Woods has always been creepy, but here he goes for the flat out mind games and succeeds elegantly. His performance alone is worth the price of admission. If the memory of the Academy can last, this might actually earn him another Best Supporting Actor nod. He's that good.

This isn't to call the film perfect however. After the well-done opening sequence, there's about 15 minutes of set-up for Travolta's character that seems like it has a touch more action than really necessary, as if West felt obligated to jam a little in.

Also, as the film wraps up, the ending wobbles a little bit, but for the most part it wraps up fairly well. A few plot threads don't close off as well as they could, but it's still good enough to make solid weekend entertainment.



MATT HANEY/DN

The Facts

Title: "Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me"
Stars: Mike Meyers, Heather Graham, Verne D. Troyer
Director: Jay Roach
Rating: PG-13 (adult language)
Grade: B
Five Words: Austin is supremely funny again