

Despite few good moments, 'Duets' falls flat

BY SAMUEL MCKEON

"Duets" is a contrived and messy little movie, but it's my kind of contrived and messy little movie. It takes place in a series of rented cars and poorly lit hotel rooms, the Weather Channel still on the TV from the night before. One character, a business lackey who has racked 800,000 frequent flyer miles, encounters his nightmare when he realizes he's at a meeting in the wrong city. This, in some strange way, is a dream of mine.

The movie is also about karaoke, in the sense that instead of characters, say, hitting a deer on the road, they stop at a seedy bar and belt out Otis Redding. There are six main characters in "Duets," five get their own song. Gwyneth Paltrow, whose father, Bruce, directs the film, gets two, and Huey Lewis, Mr. News himself, gets three.

I suppose one could consider the songs, which happen along the road trip, and the big karaoke championships (that inexplicably are held in Omaha for the movie) the highlights.

Outside Gwyneth's rendition of "Bette Davis Eyes," a weaker yet surprisingly sexy way of redoing the tune, the karaoke is a distraction. The three stories that intertwine through the music aren't particularly well done, either, but in strange ways, "Duets" is appealing.

Paltrow the actress heads that list with her odd portrayal of a ditzy Vegas girl who, at a funeral for her mother, discovers her lost father (Lewis), a karaoke hustler who bets the best singer in the tune house he can out sing them, then does.

This girl, a groupie who we gather has no sex with the big stars (after "Almost Famous," I doubt this, seriously) is such a miserably written role it's hard to imagine Paltrow could do anything with it. She does.

Other solid character actors litter the scene. In a separate storyline, the fed-up businessman (Paul Giamatti) hooks up with an ex-con (Andre

MOVIE REVIEW

Duets

Director: Bruce Paltrow

Stars: Gwyneth Paltrow, Paul Giamatti, Andre Braugher

Rating: R (language)

★ ★ ★ of 4 stars



Huey Lewis and Gwyneth Paltrow play a father-daughter tandem in the movie "Duets." The movie was directed by Paltrow's father, Bruce.

Braugher) in the businessman's stolen car. Giamatti plays a variation of Steve Martin's compilation of disheveled-and-disillusioned white collar guy he made a career out of after "The Jerk."

Braugher, recently voted the best the television cop in an online poll for his former role on "Homicide," plays the even straighter man of sorts, who's seen enough pain to know that the businessman's rebellion needs to be stopped, right before it needs to be redeemed after a fatal accident in a convenience store.

The third story plays out like that piece of dessert you didn't really need, as a cab driver (Scott Speedman) drives a karaoke pro (Maria Bello) to California, stopping in Omaha along the way.

Bello plays the sharp, wounded girl well, but her scenes feel unneeded.

"Duets" had a lot of production problems (the film shot two years) and Bruce Paltrow battled distributors over the film's final cut. Maybe this is why the movie feels undone at its conclusion, why the

surprise ending, to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Freebird," blows in like a stiff wind from left field.

Singular moments, like Giamatti's continual disengagement with his inability to actually cash in his frequent flyer miles (the offers are always expiring by one day) and Gwyneth's doe-eyed karaoke dance, work their charms.

And I liked Lewis' performance, a nice riff on the sort of jaded lounge lizard that answers each of his daughter's questions with as little energy and depth as possible.

It adds up to very little, but the good parts in "Duets" are worth watching a less-than-great whole; that is, if rental cars, hotel rooms and Gwyneth Paltrow are your thing.

Producer transforms Madonna's 'Music'

MADONNA from page 8

ed with the album is to make it marketable to a world-wide audience.

Madonna has become less useful in her recordings since her dip into the techno-dance-pop genre.

The lyrics throughout the album, the only aspect of the music which can truly be attributed to Madonna herself, are uninteresting, uninspired and disposable to the point where the listener can feel no remorse for disregarding the vocals.

Yet the album is worthy of the top spot on the Billboard Charts where it debuted. Mirwais knows the art of intricate techno compositions, enriching the fabric of his electronic art with subtle additions of synth, drums, vocoder and ambient sounds.

In "Impressive Instant," Mirwais pays special attention to the vocal line, drastically bending it, sometimes to the point of breaking, to make it do what he wishes. An almost overuse of digital delays and pitch shifts makes Madonna just another instrument at his disposal.

His manipulations on "Don't Tell Me" at first make the listener uncomfortably agitated. He cuts up a once-flowing acoustic guitar riff to make it sound like an imperfection on the disc until the drum track fills in the spaces.

This uneasy feeling is replaced by a strange camaraderie with the song in repeated listens. A bond is formed with the song after the listener knows that the chopiness is deliberate and that the anxiety should be expected. This connection is a rare experience to have with a song and makes "Music" an important album to listen to and appreciate.

Though "Music" has Madonna's name and face all over it, the music comes straight from the mind of Mirwais, a name worth remembering.

Look forward to hearing more from this talented musician when his solo album hits American shores in January, finally putting his name where it should be: on the cover.

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