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Lessons in loathing



Jack Nicholson coaches Adam Sandler in rage control techniques.

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Review by Daniel J. Stasiewski
a&e editor

If "Anger Management" is anything more than just a gimmick to get older and younger audiences to both see the same comedy, then it should take the chance to prove it. The first time Adam Sandler/Jack Nicholson collaboration doesn't go beyond mellow comedy, rendering both stars impotent. The cheap, silly gags are worth a chuckle here and there, but even veteran Nicholson doesn't shine in this lackluster comedy.

On a flight to meet his unappreciative boss, Dave Buznik (Sandler) is falsely accused of assaulting a flight attendant. Dave is normally an awkward combination of passive and anxious, but is nevertheless sentenced to therapy with anger management guru Dr. Buddy Rydell (Nicholson).

Dave's first group therapy session introduces him to a number of stereotypical caricatures from the obsessive Philadelphia sports fanatic to lesbian porn stars with some anger issues when their tongues are stuck down each other's throats. Rydell, however, says Dave's aggression is "implosive" (bottling it up until going postal). The doctor teams Dave up with an intimidating angry buddy named Chuck (John Turturro).

Chuck has primal need to beat the crap out of anyone looking at him the wrong way. When Chuck and Dave go to a bar together, a fight breaks out (courtesy of Chuck) and Dave ends up back in court for assaulting a waitress with a blind man's white cane.

Instead of going to prison, Dave is sentenced to 30 days of Rydell's 24-hour, in-home therapy. The intensive program includes fighting a transvestite prostitute, beating up a childhood bully (who just happens to be a Buddhist monk), picking-up women with lewd lines, and watching Rydell steal away his girlfriend (Marisa Tomei)—all for the sake of anger management.

I had this fantasy "Anger Management" would not be a routine Adam Sandler film because Nicholson was in it,

so it's quite disheartening to sit through the film without being entertained. Instead, Nicholson is used as a marketing tool, putting his name next to Sandler's on thousands of ads, just so he can walk through an amusing role any actor could play.

Nicholson only brings status to the film, so he doesn't make his character anything special. Sandler, however, must still be dizzy after starring "Punch-Drunk Love." The toned-down comedy and timid character are signs Sandler is still trying to break out of his "Billy Madison" persona. Sure, it's nice when Sandler doesn't throw a temper-tantrum after having cake thrown at him, but every other character in the film has that childish rage Sandler abandons.

When the other characters have little eruptions, it's almost as if they are making fun of the way Sandler usually acts. As a matter of fact, most of the film comes as a big joke only the actors can appreciate.

Picture this. One day, Sandler meets Nicholson. They get to like each other and throw together a fun movie that's only funny to the people who make it. "Anger Management" is like a high school video project with a multi-million-dollar budget and first-class catering. Honestly, can anyone find Nicholson and Sandler singing "I Feel Pretty" in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge more than just amusing? Well, the actors probably had a ton of fun shooting it.

"Amusing," however, is the key word, because I didn't hate "Anger Management." It's a comedy that could offer so much more, but never takes itself seriously enough to do so. I never thought I'd see the day Nicholson couldn't help out a wounded movie, but I won't lose my temper over it.



"Anger Management" directed by Peter Segal, starring Adam Sandler, Jack Nicholson, Marisa Tomei, and John Turturro is now playing at Tinsletown.

Pacific Northwest band moves up to arenas as opener for Pearl Jam

by Hector Florin
Knight Ridder Newspapers

"It's a very intense, sort of frightening time that we're living in," Carrie Brownstein of the band Sleater-Kinney is saying two weeks before "shock and awe" officially entered, and then slipped from, the vocabulary.

Sure, one musician's opinion on global conflict can easily be dismissed as liberal yapping. Sleater-Kinney, after all, is based in the Pacific Northwest, where leftist political thought can be as prevalent as rain. And this is a band that launched its own preemptive strike on the state of the world with the release of last year's "One Beat."

It's a record that has grown more timely with each uncertain month. More than just pointing fingers, the members of Sleater-Kinney point at problems, most of their lyrical themes falling under the states of relationships and current affairs. That's the basis of their staunch indie cred. They're happily entrenched on the Kill Rock Stars label and in their community, in which Sleater-Kinney prefers to keep the tunes pure and the opinions unfiltered, with glimmers of hope just in reach.

But now comes Sleater-Kinney's most mainstream venture to date: touring large arenas, opening for Pearl Jam on 11 dates across the South.

"We were definitely interested in doing something different," says guitarist Brownstein, who is joined in the group by guitarist-vocalist Corin Tucker and drummer Janet Weiss. "I think it's good to do that once in a while."

This is the critically acclaimed band's first foray into Florida, a state that until now was on the list with Oklahoma, Alaska and Arkansas as places Sleater-Kinney had yet to visit. On the phone from her Portland, Ore., home, Brownstein explains: "As a band, we just have not been to Florida."

Thanks, ladies.

The band was born during Olympia, Washington's early '90s riot-grrrl movement, centered on Bikini Kill founder Kathleen Hanna, still being her feminist self in Le Tigre. Tucker (Heavens to Betsy) and Brownstein (Excuse 17) named Sleater-Kinney after the freeway near their practice space.

A self-titled debut and the 1996 album "Call the Doctor" followed, the latter including the ubiquitous "I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone," a song in which Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore gets equal love.

Tucker's desperate, shrill, ringing vocals prove a perfect mix with Brownstein's. More than just harmonizing, their voices overlap, like two characters playing different roles. Their guitar interplay (without any bass) proved a huge, worthwhile risk that set Sleater-

Kinney apart. It's comparable to other such rock-band twosomes as Television's Richard Lloyd-Tom Verlaine and The Clash's Joe Strummer-Mick Jones.

"It just started by default," Brownstein says. "Corin and I didn't play bass. We wanted three people. We were out of luck."

Acclaim soon followed. Legendary rock scribe Greil Marcus called Sleater-Kinney "America's best rock band" in Time magazine, and another well-regarded indie band, The Go-Betweens, used them as guest musicians on "The Friends of Rachel Worth."

"You just have to take it with a grain of salt," Brownstein says. "You can't play music based on the opinions of other people. We feel very fortunate fans and critics like our music. But we play music because WE need it. We love that dynamic."

The good reviews continued with "One Beat," released in August. Their most complete album, it touches on Sept. 11 ("Far Away"), its aftermath ("Step Aside, Combat Rock") and parenthood ("Sympathy"), Tucker and her hubby, filmmaker Lance Bangs, recently had a baby boy, Marshall Tucker Bangs.

"This album to me is the most vast album," Brownstein says. "The sonic landscape of this record is the broadest in terms of energy, in terms of the content."

'Soul Food' still cooking up big drama, but not for long

by Miki Turner
Knight Ridder Newspapers

For the past three seasons, Showtime's award-winning drama "Soul Food" has been, as the lyrics to its opening theme song proclaim, good for the soul.

It defied the notion that African-American dramas can't succeed on prime-time television. It furthered the careers of truly gifted actors: Nicole Ari Parker, Vanessa Williams, Malinda Williams, Rockmond Dunbar, Darrin DeWitt Henson, Aaron Meeks and Boris Kodjoe.

It provided its audience with universal, well-written stories enhanced by the uncensored permissiveness of cable television.

As the show, based on the 1997 film of the same name and developed for television by Felicia D. Henderson, enters its fourth season, the story lines will become even more complex and topical.

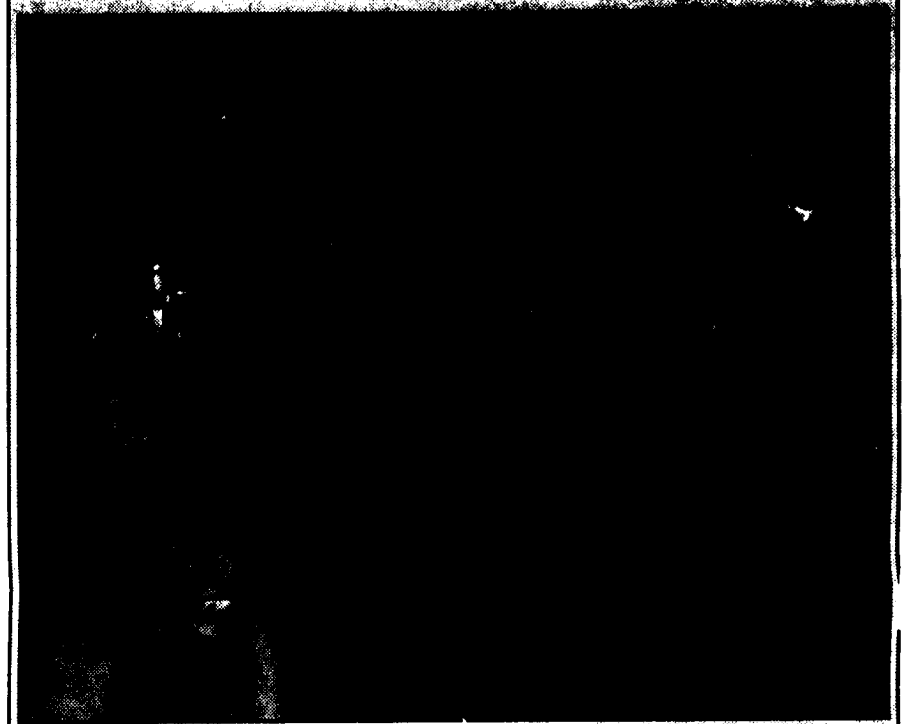
Young Ahmad (Meeks) will catch his parents (Vanessa Williams and Dunbar)

that open door, that opportunity to be successful. We could be out there as much as we are in real life and succeed like we do in real life. This show reflects black America and America as a whole."

Dunbar's right about his boss. Henderson, who also serves as executive producer with Tracey E. and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, Robert Teitel and George Tillman Jr., wouldn't listen to the naysayers.

"I always anticipated the no's and where they would be coming from," Henderson says. "I was ready. I always assume I'm going to hear 'no,' so I can have 10 ways to attack that 'no' and then turn it into a 'yes.' Everyone involved was on a mission. When you have that, as opposed to people just feeling like the show was a job, it becomes this whole big powerful, forceful family that refuses to take no as an answer."

Sadly, however, Paramount has said no to extending the show beyond the fifth season, which begins next February. The reason? The bottom line,



The cast of Showtime's "Soul Food."

PHOTO COURTESY OF TVTOME.COM

in a compromising position on the kitchen counter, and deal with the messy psychological aftermath. One of the main characters will battle alcoholism, and another will struggle through the anguish of terminating an unwanted pregnancy.

These types of story arcs play well on more conventional network dramas with predominantly white casts such as "ER," "Judging Amy" and the recently canceled "Providence." But for some reason, they fall flat when black folks are involved.

"I don't think networks have offered enough black dramas to see whether or not they will succeed," says Seattle Times television critic Kay McFadden. "It's impossible to draw conclusions as to why they don't make it because we have nothing to really base it on."

Most network executives will argue that these shows are too limited in scope to appeal to mass audiences. Some admit that they're rarely given an opportunity to build an audience because they can't meet the bottom line.

But "Soul Food" has twice won NAACP Image Awards and is in production for its fifth and final season in Toronto.

"It was given a chance up front," says Malinda Williams. "Most networks, already fearful of putting black shows on the air, will only order a limited number of episodes. Showtime ordered 20. That gave people a chance to see it. The other thing is that it has a universal theme, and people are curious to peek into other cultures."

Dunbar credits the chemistry of the cast, the talented writing staff and Henderson.

"It was definitely having Felicia D. Henderson as executive producer and not accepting anything except the right answers to the questions," he says. "She's a strong black woman. It was so nice to be a part of this history and have a woman be the head of it. And being that it was on Showtime really gave it

again. Although the show has done well for Paramount domestically and has increased Showtime's subscriber base significantly, Henderson says she was told it was too hard a sell overseas.

Apparently, what's good for the soul in Peoria doesn't digest well in Prague. The decision has stirred strong emotions in some of the cast.

"I hate to even think about it," says Malinda Williams, who plays Bird. "This cast is like my second family, and although I know we'll still keep in touch, it's hard because I'm still going to miss them. It hurts also because we still have a great following. People schedule events around our show, parties..."

Adds NAACP Image Award winner Vanessa Williams: "I think this is much deeper and darker than it outwardly appears. In America, you can sell anything. Our audience wasn't all-black and not all-female. The network will miss us when we're gone. They will realize our value."

Five years on a cable network is a pretty good run for any show. Henderson's disappointment stems from the fact she has more stories to tell and also because "Soul Food" is her child.

"You can imagine that after watching four seasons of people working really, really hard and still seeing the audience respond enthusiastically, it feels like a really abrupt ending," she says.

"Everything has sort of a natural life span, and I don't feel like "Soul Food" is over," Henderson says.

Of the show's ending, Henderson expressed sadness, "but (I'm) excited as well for the actors who are also excited. For most of them it's the highest profile they've ever had. I'm excited for the Hollywood community.

"They'll get a shot at them now." Unless the powers that be at Paramount discover that the show really is good for the soul.