

Black's 'School' rocks



Joan Cusack goes toe-to-toe with the tenacious Jack Black in "School of Rock."

Paramount Pictures

review by Daniel J. Stasiewski
a&e editor

"School of Rock" is going to do for Jack Black what "Liar Liar" did for Jim Carrey. The "family" comedy still relies on the Black his teenage and twenty-something fanatics love, but his naturally burnt-out appearance and flamboyantly cumbersome physical humor don't necessarily scream superstardom.

What makes Black a phenomenon is his unyielding command of the screen. He does the impossible and out shines a room of talented 10-year-olds. True, the kids are all a bunch of prep-school stiffs at first, but Black's elaborate comedic escapades show his students have a wild side and his audience has a flexible sense of humor.

Black plays his usual character, this time named Dewey Finn. Finn is a wild man, and his larger-than-life stage presence gets him kicked out of the band he created. He sleeps surrounded by rock memorabilia, rotting food--and I assume a few empty dime bags and a bong.

But it's not in his apartment. Finn lives in a corner of his best friend Ned's (Mike White) place. Finn has no money for rent so Ned's straight-and-narrow girlfriend tries to kick the slacker out, forcing him to find "real job," fast.

Finn sinks so low he almost sells his guitar, but a call for his friend to substitute teach at a swanky prep school comes in and Finn poses as Ned to get the job. There, the up-tight principal (Joan Cusack) tells him to stick to the curriculum and follow the rules, but Finn just tells the kids to go have recess. The kids agree, listen to his occasional ranting and raving and on Tuesdays go to music class.

When Finn follows the students to a music lesson, he sees talent. The rock-junkie starts to stroke their upper-class egos and creates a detailed school project, a rock band with Finn as the lead. Finn teaches his students the lessons of rock, but the

parents inevitably misunderstand his passion because their eyes are on Harvard, not the House of Blues.

As I said before, Finn is not an unusual character for Black. In fact, I'd bet the role was written for him. He's a teacher who breaks all the rules and tells kids everything they're not supposed to hear (but will come to experience like the rest of us). Black's tirade about "The Man" is the highlight of the film. Later on, when one student says to the principal, "You're the man" we start to get the impact of Finn as a mentor.

Some of the credit for Black's performance does go to director Richard Linklater, who lets Black perform. Linklater at one point keeps the camera on Black for one long take, providing Black with one of his best opportunities to show off.

Even veteran actress Joan Cusack surrenders to Black's comedy and doesn't try to outdo him. Cusack is funny in her own way, more subdued. Her character dresses like Miss Gulch from "The Wizard of Oz" and is stiffer than year-old gum on the bottom of a desk. Though she's mostly eclipsed by Black, Cusack doesn't hesitate to work with Black's eccentric personality, allowing for the stick in her character's ass to loosen a bit.

The film makes allusions to drug use and has a few sexual references, not excluding a groupie joke, but it's nothing compared to a normal Black flick. "School of Rock" is a bizarre film in that it won't let down a Black fan, showing his comedic grace is steadfast even without barefaced stoner jokes. And it's not something a 10-year-old shouldn't see. Black is surprisingly compassionate when it comes to the kids, pulling off an unforgettable rock show and giving their confidence a kick in the ass. The one thing Black has to do now is figure out how much marijuana and McDonald's \$20 million can get him.

"School of Rock," directed by Richard Linklater and starring Jack Black and Joan Cusack, is currently showing at Tinseltown.

☆☆☆1/2
out of
4 stars

Stone puts soul into her music

by Tom Moon
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Do you have to be black to possess that elusive quality known as "soul"?

R&B veteran Betty Wright, of "Clean Up Woman" fame, doesn't think so.

"I never looked at a person and said 'that's a soul singer' judging by the color of their skin," says the 49-year-old artist, who is African-American. "I used to get so ticked by that thinking, you know, 'if she's black she sings soul and if she's white she sings pop.'"

Wright doesn't need to argue the point these days. All she has to do is put on "The Soul Sessions" (S-curve, 3 stars), the just-issued debut CD by Joss Stone that she helped produce.

Stone is a white 16-year-old from the English village of Devon. But when she sings Aretha Franklin or Carla Thomas, she sounds like one of those semi-anonymous background singers who, after serving up attitude on countless recordings from Detroit or Memphis, has emerged from the shadows with a few scores to settle. She has the natural voice, the crazy ad-lib skills and an ability to project wisdom that is well beyond her years.

"What I love about Joss," Wright said the other day from New York, where she was helping Stone prepare for a record-release show, is that "she's so contrary to what people have been brought up to believe. Most of the young girls who are setting out to be stars don't have anything to contribute musically."

On a recent trip to Philadelphia to do promotion, Stone confessed that she stumbled into soul. She's not one of those UK soul fanatics who know the name of every drummer to record for Stax. In fact, she says, "I don't know the history of any of it. I just know I like singing it." And though her friends listen to everything from Missy Elliott to Tracy Chapman to

Whitney Houston, she's given up trying to convert them to the classics.

"One time I tried to play Aretha Franklin," recalls Stone, whose father is a big fan of the old British punk trio the Jam (and was stunned to learn his daughter has plans to collaborate with front man Paul Weller) but also keeps soul and jazz CDs around the house. After putting on "Respect," she remembers getting a blank stare from a friend.

"I was like, 'How can you not like this?' but she just wasn't feeling it. That was a good lesson for me. Now I don't even play my music for (friends). It's not their thing."

"The Soul Sessions," a collection of covers, happened almost by accident, Stone says. After winning a British TV talent show, the singer found herself inundated with offers. She quickly acquired management, then accepted a recording contract with S-curve Records, the independent run by Steve Greenberg, who helped launch Hanson in the early '90s.

At Greenberg's suggestion, Stone traveled to the States to collaborate with songwriter Desmond Child, who lives in Miami. They wrote several songs--Stone expects at least one to surface on an album of contemporary-leaning originals she's working on--and she met Wright. The next thing she knew, she was in the studio recording with a band of soul veterans including organist Timmy Thomas ("Why Can't We Live Together") and guitarist Little Beaver.

Throughout the four-day whirlwind that yielded most of the set, Stone soaked up the insights of Wright, an underappreciated genius of R&B.

"Betty is just so amazing," says Stone, who explains that Wright suggested some of the CD's material, including Franklin's hit "All the King's Horses," and provided a few basic "guide" vocals. "She sings in that way that lets you know she's feeling

it. To me, Betty's like a preacher in everything she sings."

Wright says she showed Stone some rudimentary things, such as how to shape her phrases and to leave room for the songs to breathe. But she didn't have to do much.

"If I sang a note," Wright recalled, "she'd be right there to trade the note. Sometimes she'd ask me to do a phrase again, and by the second time she had it. Every time she'd encounter something new, she just went for it. I kept throwing different songs and different ideas at her. She tried all of it."

Among "The 'Soul Sessions'" delights is to hear Stone tear away from the familiar melody of, say, the Isley Brothers' "For the Love of You" or the Drifters' "Some Kind of Wonderful" and improvise. In a voice that's resolute but never severe, she brings songs written before she was born into the present and communicates feeling without shouting or showboating. On the White Stripes' "Fell in Love With a Boy," which features the Roots, Stone transforms the simple, sing-song melody into a poised, timeless slice of autobiography.

When asked about her version of "All the King's Horses," Stone cringes. "I just want to say I'm sorry to all the Aretha Franklin fans. I know I shouldn't have done it. I don't think it's possible to even get close to what she did. All I can say is I was scared, petrified, recording it."

But despite her reverence for many soul greats, Stone never viewed their smoldering ballads as sacred texts, never felt that the music was off-limits.

"I've gotten questions like, 'What are you doing, singing this music?' " she says, showing slight annoyance. "And to me, it's so simple. This is music that can make you cry or change your perspective. When I sing it, I know people feel something. Isn't that enough?"

New 'Tarzan' swings onto The WB Sunday

by Tom Jicha
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

"Tarzan" is supposed to be fun. "Tarzan" in New York should be more fun than a day at the circus, and when "Tarzan" hit the Big Apple in 1942, it was.

Johnny Weissmuller dove off the Brooklyn Bridge into the East River, and a stampede of circus elephants helped Tarzan and Jane rescue Boy from kidnappers. That's what the Tarzan beloved by millions does.

The producers of The WB's "Tarzan" have no grasp of any of this. They don't appreciate anything that has made Edgar Rice Burroughs' King of the Jungle an enduring favorite. The WB's "Tarzan" is dark and humorless. There are no exotic animals, not even Cheeta. The Jane of lore and Boy don't exist in this Tarzan's world. They never did.

The Superman update "Smallville" has its "no tights, no flights" rule. This "Tarzan," starring fashion hunk Travis Fimmel, has its own maxim, according to executive producer Eric Kripke. "Our exact words are, 'No loincloth, no yodeling.' We don't want that. ... It's really going to be a 'Tarzan' people have never seen before."

It's a "Tarzan" people have never seen before because it's "Tarzan" in name only. Kripke has decided that he knows more than the dozens of producers and directors who have created almost a hundred "Tarzans" around the globe for going on a century. Even allowing for the concept's heightened reality, the feats the new "Tarzan" performs are out of character and ludicrously unbelievable.

The first time Tarzan is seen in Sunday's premiere, he's strapped to a gurney, shackled like someone about to receive a lethal injection. Using brute strength, he breaks out of his bonds. As unlikely as this might be, it's not totally out of line with the legend.

What comes next, however, is. From a flatfooted start, Tarzan leaps two stories through observation-studio glass in a bid to escape. He's bare-chested and bare-footed but he suffers not so much as a scratch while shattering this window, then another during his getaway.

Tarzan is being held against his will by his father's brother, Richard Clayton, played by former "X-Files" Mitch Pileggi. Clayton's nephew was just a child when a plane carrying his family across Africa crashed. Only little John Clayton survived, to grow up as Tarzan amidst the natives and animals, until a search party led by his uncle captured him and brought him back to the United States.

Richard justifies the bondage as protecting his nephew from the dangers of his new environment. In fact, it's a power grab. Whoever controls Tarzan controls the family business empire, Greystoke.



The WB Network
Travis Fimmel's wild side is unleashed in The WB's "Tarzan."

Apparently cognizant of the premiere's problems, the WB will introduce a new character in the second episode, Richard's sister, played by Lucy Lawless of "Xena: Warrior Princess" fame. "She and Richard sort of battle over Tarzan's soul and, with it, control of Greystoke. So it's this massive power struggle between two very powerful titans of New York City," Kripke said.

The battle for Tarzan's heart, if not the rest of him, will be brief. "The aunt lives in the Clayton ancestral home, one of those old mansions on Fifth Avenue," Kripke said. "Within it is an overgrown greenhouse, a solarium. It's really the only place in the city where Tarzan feels comfortable, so he stays there."

This Tarzan might not swing on vines but he must have taken martial arts classes back in the jungle. Trapped on the roof of the Greystoke building, he kicks the stuffing out of a battalion of his uncle's commandos. (Why a businessman needs his own army goes unexplained.)

The pilot is just a medley of Tarzan escaping, being recaptured, then escaping again, in circumstances that are ever more farfetched.

Each time Tarzan gets loose, he crosses paths with a policewoman named Jane, played by Sarah Wayne Callies. Initially, Jane sees Tarzan only as a man on the lam she has been commanded to bring in. She's deeply in love with a fellow detective and is exhilarated that he has just asked her to share a place. By the end of the hour, she's swooning into Tarzan's arms.

Kripke, who clearly doesn't have the respect for the franchise that his position should entail, unwittingly condemned his own vision in describing why Richard doesn't consider himself a bad guy.

"Any real villain is the hero of his own story. From his point of view, it's crazy to let Tarzan run around and risk his neck. If he's wild, you have to control him. You've got to rehabilitate him. You've got to teach him to read. You have to introduce him into society. What Richard doesn't realize is that would be killing everything that is unique and special about Tarzan." Exactly.

International Film Series 'Nine Queens'



Sony Picture Classics

Argentine director Fabian Bielinsky's deliciously devious comedy about con artists successfully cons the audience. There are many stings-within-a-sting in this beehive of a film.--Carrie Rickey, Knight Ridder Newspapers.

"Nine Queens," directed by Fabian Bielinsky and starring Ricardo Darin, is showing as part of the International Film Series. Monday at 7 p.m. in Reed 117.