

Reviews: Movies & Books

MAX WEISS ON NEW FILMS AND JOHN LEWIS ON NEW BOOKS AND MUSIC



Pain & Gain



Starring Mark Wahlberg and Dwayne Johnson; directed by Michael Bay; R

I'm tempted to call Michael Bay's *Pain & Gain* a clever film for dumb people. It operates under the guiding principle that if you put ironic air quotes around everything, you are immune from all criticism. The characters can be vile, the violence gratuitous, the film can be casually misogynistic and anti-Semitic, but hey, that's okay because it's all just a *joke*, people. Lighten up.

The film begins to insulate itself right out of the gate by saying, "This is based on a true story . . . unfortunately." (I laughed.)

It's Miami in the 1990s. Our "hero" is Daniel Lugo (Mark Wahlberg), a bodybuilder and personal trainer who believes that his own physical perfection is merely his first step toward the American dream. One of his clients is a self-made millionaire named Victor Kershaw (Tony Shalhoub), a greedy and grasping little man with a giant Star of David dangling from his hairy chest (for reals). Lugo gets the idea to kidnap Kershaw and get him to sign away his fortune. He recruits two bodybuilding cohorts: Paul Doyle (Dwayne Johnson), a former cokehead just out of prison, now a guileless born-again Christian; and Adrian Doorbal (Anthony Mackie), a gym rat who's been made impotent by his steroid habit.

We're supposed to find these guys likeable but dunderheaded—overgrown, misguided kids who just happen to do extremely violent and even vicious things. We're meant to laugh at their stupidity, but root for them, too. Lugo, in particular, is so sentimentalized that once he steals Kershaw's house, he fulfills his dream to ride atop a giant lawn mower and bond with members of the neighborhood association.

The scene where the boys try to kill Kershaw, several times, in bumbling fashion, is played for laughs—right down to the moment they drive a truck over his skull and Bay shows us a close-up of the tire tread ramming into his head. Kershaw lives, for what it's worth—so later we can be treated to a glorious scene where his obese hospital roommate has explosive diarrhea all over the bathroom stall. (And if you don't think Bay shows us the aftermath in the stall, you haven't been paying attention.)

Did I mention the misogyny? Lugo has a stripper girlfriend who is so dumb she makes him seem like a Mensa member. At one point, he hands her off to Doyle, as if she's some sort of relay baton.

Yes, *Pain & Gain* occasionally scores as a black comedy, and the acting is committed across the board—Ed Harris brings a much-needed touch of gravitas as a grizzled private eye hired by Kershaw—but, on balance, I found the experience of watching it fairly . . . painful.

Spike Lee's America

David Sterritt (Polity)

Sterritt, a MICA professor and film critic, examines Lee's career through various lenses, not just place. He credits Lee as a visionary filmmaker in it for the long haul, but doesn't shy away from pointing out perceived shortcomings in his work. Sterritt acknowledges his subject is highly opinionated and can be overly strident, but he consistently underscores Lee's determination and commitment to addressing thorny aspects of American life. By doing so in such clear-eyed fashion, he vaults Lee from African-American filmmaker to vital American artist.



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Esopus

This twice-yearly arts magazine, now in its tenth year, continues to amaze. Founded by Carroll County native Tod Lippy, *Esopus* deserves its own category at the National Magazine Awards—perhaps "Best Superlatives Generator." Ad-free and meticulously put together, this issue includes multiple artist projects (with fold-outs and posters), archival material from the files of the Museum of Modern Art (tucked inside a manila folder bound into the magazine), *Blue Velvet* film stills, exhibition reviews by museum guards, and a CD of commissioned music. In Lippy's hands, print is not only alive, it's also animated, interactive, and irresistible.



B To read more from managing editor Max Weiss, check out her film and pop-culture blog, *MaxSpace*, at baltimoremagazine.net/maxspace.