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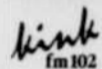
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



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## CINEMA

### As bad as it gets

Ignore the rave reviews you may have read elsewhere:  
*Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* is a real stinker

BY WILL O'BRYAN

First the disclaimer: Reputable reviewers across the country love *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*. From the *New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times*, "We love Billy!" they seem to scream.

With that out of the way, I'm free to write what I think without guilt: I've seen more depth in a urinal.

The reviews and post-Sundance Film Festival word of mouth had me anticipating this movie. I didn't know anything about the story, but I'd heard plenty of positive buzz.

Upon viewing it, however, I feared that either some *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* scenario was well underway, replacing vast numbers of decent, intelligent filmgoers with dimwitted vegetable-based aliens, or that *Screen Kiss* has a monumental advertising machine at its disposal. My only expressive reaction was four yawns. I didn't laugh. (Not nearly!) I didn't cry (except for myself). And I certainly didn't care. (Couldn't have cared less, actually.)

Billy (Sean P. Hayes) begins his story in bed with Fernando (Armando Valdes-Kennedy). Billy sleeps with Fernando while simultaneously making snide, morally superior swipes at Fernando's open relationship. His hypocrisy didn't endear Billy to me.

Billy falls head over heels for pretty boy Gabriel (Brad Rowe) before Gabriel utters a word, then pursues him shamelessly despite Gabriel's claim of heterosexuality. His shallowness and immaturity didn't endear Billy to me.

So I was left following a story with a mildly offensive, very whiny protagonist. Even his tearful childhood reminiscence didn't touch me. And the Gabriel character could just as well have kept his mouth shut throughout the film. He was a paper doll.

Minor characters—Meredith Scott Lynn as Billy's gal pal Georgiana; Richard Ganoung as Billy's mentor and patron, Perry—were more interesting than Billy and Gabriel.

Still I feel sorry for Richard Ganoung. He was cute in the 1986 film *Parting Glances* as best friend to Steve Buscemi's queer, HIV-positive New Wave character. He could at least have gotten a haircut for *Screen Kiss*.

Writer-director Tommy O'Haver's treatment of Christopher Bradley as Andrew, Georgiana's boyfriend, is cruel. In the low-budget *Leather Jacket Love Story*, Bradley showed himself to have some degree of talent. In *Screen Kiss*, his talent is smothered as he plays a caricature of a straight man. It's easy to imagine O'Haver's direction during Bradley's scenes. Perhaps something like: "Act dumber! Grunt more! You're hetero, for God's sake."

Two other characters, the performance artists Ju-Ju and Rio (Shanti Reinhardt and Kiff Scholl, respectively), were clumsily thrown in as exaggerated illustrations of the kooky Los Angeles art scene. It's as if O'Haver believes performance artists are no-talents draped in silver lamé whom one always finds at decadent parties speaking in accents appropriate to a perfume commercial. Again, I recalled a *Parting Glances* party scene with German performance artists who were at least slightly relevant to the story. Besides, it was 1986—twelve years ago the idea of performance art was funny in the mainstream.

Having Rio and Ju-Ju in one scene would not have been offensive, just taxing. Having them return for a second scene, as if someone were asking for an encore, was a strained attempt to squeeze some humor out of an old joke that had a five-year window—when Reagan was in office—to be funny.

Despite the rave reviews elsewhere, I know my distaste for *Screen Kiss* can't be completely off-base. Maybe everyone else believed the publicity materials that liken it to light-hearted Doris Day movies of the '50s and '60s—such blasphemy! I loved her movies when I was a kid and I still do. A pleasant mood often finds me softly singing the theme from *Pillow Talk* to myself.



Sean P. Hayes (left) and Meredith Scott Lynn

Nor is Billy's bitter aftertaste due to some demand on my part for more depth from queer movies. I liked *Kiss Me Guido* and adored *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. I don't need heavy-handed depth. Simply, *Screen Kiss*'s redeeming qualities are scant.

There is some clever use of Polaroid photographs, clever enough to have carried a 10-minute short film beautifully. And there's a cute scene with Billy and Gabriel in bed, dancing that uncomfortable and exciting ballet of "Should I move closer?" "Did he just brush my arm?" etc., that happens when innocent bed sharing is about to lead to something more. That was all I could find.

Had *Screen Kiss* been a low-budget sleeper, perhaps I'd be more forgiving. But this movie has higher production values than most queer movies. I'm saddened that a queer filmmaker like O'Haver couldn't do more with the opportunity given him. With all the great press he's gotten for *Screen Kiss*, though, he's bound to have a lot more chances to make up for this boring film.

On the other hand, some loud people are saying they like what they see, and if they tell him it ain't broke, why should he fix it?

If, however, you're like me and you can see that the emperor wears no clothes, console yourself with a rented copy of *Pillow Talk* and know that you're not alone.

■ **BILLY'S HOLLYWOOD SCREEN KISS** opens Friday, Aug. 21 at KOIN Cinemas. Call 225-5555, ext. 4608, for show times.