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## movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH



Existential  
Detective  
Bernard Jaffe  
(Dustin  
Hoffman) zips  
Albert (Jason  
Schwartzman)  
into his bag.

CLAUDETTE BARIUS, FOX SEARCHLIGHT, 2004

## Being or Nothingness

An absurd comedy from David Russell

**I HEART HUCKABEES:** Writer, director, producer David O. Russell. Co-writer, Jeff Baena. Producers Gregory Goodman, Scott Rudin. Executive producer, Michael Kuhn. Cinematography, Peter Deming. Production design, K.K. Barrett. Editor, Robert K. Lambert. Costumes, Mark Bridges. Music, Jon Brion. Starring Jason Schwartzman, Lily Tomlin, Jude Law, Isabelle Huppert, Dustin Hoffman, Naomi Watts and Mark Wahlberg. Fox Searchlight, 2004. R. 105 minutes.

One of the funniest and smartest films of the year, David O. Russell's lovably eccentric *I Heart Huckabees*, defies categories, like Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* and *Being John Malkovich*. In the same way you can say *Adaptation* is about writer's block and *Malkovich* is about identity crisis, *Huckabees* is about the meaning (or futility) of life. I laughed out loud a lot, saw myself in every character and came away dying to see the movie again.

My favorite sequence takes place between Albert (Jason Schwartzman) and Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg). Let's call it the Red Balloon scene. The men — opposites by every obvious standard of looks, occupation, personality and intellect — have bonded in defiance of the Existential Detectives, Bernard (Dustin Hoffman) and Vivian Jaffe (Lily Tomlin), each has hired. The guys no longer believe everything is connected to everything else as Bernard and Vivian do. They don't find life wonderful. Instead, Albert and Tommy have taken up the teachings of the Jaffes' nemesis and former student, Catherine Vauban (Isabelle Huppert). Catherine sees life as a cruel, meaningless exercise. Besides, she's sexy.

Caught in a vise-grip between the Jaffes and Catherine's polarized positions, Albert and Tommy have tried hard to resolve the thoughts that race through their minds. They've nearly driven themselves crazy. Now, they resort to brute force. Albert smashes the Red Balloon into Tommy's face. "Again," Tommy demands. Albert hits him harder. "Again," he begs, and "Again." Tommy stares into space, with a goofy smile.

Now it's Albert's turn. "Hit me," he cries, milliseconds before Tommy bangs the balloon into Albert's smug puss so hard Albert falls over backward onto the ground. He picks himself up. "Again," Albert orders. Repeatedly, Tommy slams Albert. When enlightenment dawns, a stupefied Albert struggles for words. It's great, he says; for a minute, my thoughts stopped.

Tommy and Albert figure they can knock each other batty every few hours to experience a moment of mental stillness, which will help them figure out if everything is irredeemably fucked or not.

This ploy is not the only way the film's characters try to calm their anger and paranoia, but repetitive bashing works as a metaphor for what the film is getting at. Don't ask me to be any more specific. For a fuller explanation, you'll have to see the film.

Other good reasons to see the film include the excellent cast, with Naomi Watts as Dawn Campbell, the Huckabee's super store model, and Jude Law as Brad Stand, an ambitious corporate suck-up, who takes over the environmental coalition Albert founded, Open Spaces. On his way up the corporate ladder, Brad acquires Dawn.

Schwartzman plays Albert as an annoying whiner, a big-time bore, who imagines himself a deep, mature poet. Albert's scene with his mother is a true gem. It's not as edgy as the reluctant reunion in Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo 66* (1997), but Vivian and Bernard notice mother sheds a lot of light on Albert's existential dilemma.

Wahlberg plays Tommy as a buff firefighter whose vision of the world changed after 9/11. Trapped inside his head, Tommy can't connect emotionally with his wife and daughter, who've left him. This role is a good stretch for Wahlberg, with its combination of seriously questioning reality, self-examination and crude slapstick. Wahlberg worked with Russell on *Three Kings* (1999), in which he gave another memorable performance.

It's divine to see the ever-excellent Tomlin onscreen again. She's a class act: a liberated comic actress. Tomlin and Hoffman make a surprising, pleasant couple. When Vivian asks Bernard, "What are we doing tonight?" and he answers, "Korean barbecue," you know their relationship is hot.

This film is a hoot. If you don't need everything to make sense in the "real" world, this film's for you. *Like Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, another of the year's best films, give yourself over to *I Heart Huckabees'* reality, and you'll feel better! Opens Oct. 22 at the Bijou, with my very highest recommendations. **EW**

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