

KATE MICUCCI, ALISON BRIE AND AUBREY PLAZA IN *THE LITTLE HOURS*

BAD HABITS

Naked nuns and Aubrey Plaza can't save the depressingly unfunny satire of The Little Hours

Where to begin with *The Little Hours*, a new comedy written and directed by Jeff Baena and based on Boccaccio's 1353 masterpiece *The Decameron*?

The film is desperately unfunny and lacking in all charm, which might be excusable if it were half as outrageous as it thinks it is. But it is entirely a stillborn affair, plagued from the get-go by a smug, indulgent mugging that strives for Monty Python satire and instead, at every step, falls flat on its sorry ass from sheer laziness and the kind of sophomoric self-regard that defines so much of our current popular culture, from *The Big Bang Theory* to Donald Trump's tweets.

The Little Hours is not only poorly made but cynically construed and limply executed, a grotesque inside joke meant to amuse its creators at the audience's expense — a *Portlandia* skit stretched like millennial taffy for 90 minutes past its expiration date. The only joke is the joke on you.

Too bad, really, because the concept and the cast would seem to promise at least a middling entertainment. Based on a single one of *The Decameron*'s hundred tales, the film centers on a trio of neophyte nuns in the 14th century — played by Alison Brie, Kate Micucci and Aubrey Plaza — who buck and bristle under the hypocritical tutelage of Father Tommasso (John C. Reilly) and Sister Marea (Molly Shannon).

After the nuns drive out the convent's elderly caretaker by pelting him with turnips ("What are you fucking looking at!" Plaza screams at the poor guy. "Stop fucking looking at me!"), Reilly — in a moment of drunken penance — brings aboard a handsome young buck (Dave Franco) to replace him, deciding that he should pose as a deaf mute for his own safety. Of course, all sorts of psycho-sexual shenanigans ensue, including but not limited to

a ménage a trois and ritual witchcraft.

And then, when Bishop Bartolomeo shows up (a typically preening, meepy Fred Armisen, all wide-eyed bemusement and whimpering), the shit really hits the fan. Women sleeping with women! Blood rites! Blasphemy! Naked nuns! Oh my!

Rich territory, no doubt, which Boccaccio mined with an eye to satirizing the patriarchal oppression of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages as it came in contact with the burgeoning urbanity of a rising mercantile class. But *The Little Hours*, with a breed of millennial arrogance that verges on nihilism, treats the story with the kind of eye-rolling disregard that throws the baby out with the bathwater. It is so blithely dismissive of the religious context it tries to parody that every comic thrust becomes an empty gesture delivered in a vacuum.

You don't have to be a Christian to comprehend the tragedy of, say, *The Scarlet Letter*. The millennial attitude seems to be, however, that there's no need to read *The Scarlet Letter* because we've already done away with Christianity. This is a devastating error, dangerous precisely because it believes itself to be a kind of antidote to our present decline, when in fact it may be accelerating it.

What we're seeing more and more of these days, perfectly exemplified by this movie, is an attitude of disregard that treats tradition and history as a kind of uprooted set piece — a playground for ignorant posturing. *The Little Hours* thinks it's being clever and cute, but it's just being tedious. You'd be better off re-watching *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, a religious satire that does not mistake flippancy for intelligence, and is all the more subversive and cutting because of that. (*Broadway Metro*)

SPIDER-MAN: HOMECOMING

This Spider-Man (Tom Holland) can't quite shake the quote that hung over the Tobey Maguire movies: "With great power comes great responsibility." But *Homecoming* turns its awareness of this Marvel mantra into an opportunity to tell a story about growth, the mistakes you have to make to learn, and one of the other most important lessons a young person in tights has to learn: that there are many ways to be heroic. Spidey's still a kid, with a voice that cracks sometimes. Holland gives him boundless energy, inventiveness, a good heart — and the script, importantly, gives him room to mess up. *Homecoming* can't get too deep into the darker side of heroic activity — it's Spider-Man's movie, after all, his coming-of-age, his acceptance of the hero he is right now and the place that needs him. But it sets the stage for some promising stories to come, both about this young hero and the strange world he calls home. (*Regal Valley River, Cinemark 17*)

THE HERO

On its surface, *The Hero* is so orthodox in its treatment of the late-life crisis-and-renewal theme that it verges on cliché: Sam Elliott plays Lee Hayden, a 70-year-old actor whose one great film, a Western, is 40 years in the past. Now Lee does commercial voice-overs for Lone Star barbecue sauce. In other words, Lee is adrift. Lee is alienated from his daughter Lucy (Krysten Ritter), and his ex-wife merely tolerates him (Katherine Ross). Lee's best friend is his drug dealer (Nick Offerman). Lee gets diagnosed with terminal cancer. He starts dating a woman half his age (Laura Prepon). But this film, in the end, is all Elliott's. The light in his eyes belies the leathery topography of his handsome face, and his performance here is painfully, joyfully humane, shot through with subtlety and an authenticity of emotion that is as captivating as the voice that defines his surface celebrity. In *The Hero*, Elliott proves himself more than capable of carrying a movie, and here's to many more. (*Broadway Metro*)

WONDER WOMAN

Wonder Woman is much more interested in ordinary people than villains. It's *people* who engage the feelings of our heroine, Diana (Gal Gadot), princess of Themyscira, who enters the world of men because she wants to help. Her world, her mythology, is built on helping; her people were *created* to help in a long-ago war. As *Wonder Woman* makes its way from a breathtaking first act to a serviceable but bland superhero-standard ending, it traces a more inclusive, more sincere narrative than any other superhero film. When she first finds herself in the world of men, Diana is all empathy, a raw nerve, enthused and horrified and mystified in turn. But when she sets foot on the muddy field of No Man's Land, putting herself in the line of fire because she has the power to do so, she transforms into Wonder Woman on every level. (*Cinemark 17, Regal Valley River*)