

Tropic Thunder and Vicky Cristina Barcelona: The unfocused and the flat as a pancake

By David Walsh
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Tropic Thunder, directed by Ben Stiller, written by Stiller, Justin Theroux and Etan Cohen; *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, written and directed by Woody Allen

Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder* is a satire about war films and Hollywood. Stiller is action star Tugg Speedman, whose most recent installment (number six) of his once-popular "Scorcher" series, "Global Meltdown," has failed badly at the box office. Speedman seems in danger of becoming box office poison.

He's in Southeast Asia somewhere shooting a Vietnam war epic, based on the memoirs of John "Four Leaf" Tayback (Nick Nolte), a war hero who lost both his hands in the earlier conflict. Tugg's co-stars include Kirk Lazarus (Robert Downey Jr.), an Australian actor who takes his roles so seriously that he's had his skin surgically darkened to play a black American soldier, and Jeff Portnoy (Jack Black), a drug-addicted star of a series of gross comedies about "The Fatties."

Among the film's most amusing moments are the faux previews for "Scorcher VI," and a medieval drama about repressed gay monks, starring Kirk Lazarus, entitled "Satan's Alley."

In any event, the film Speedman and his fellow performers are making, also "Tropic Thunder," runs into budgetary and other kinds of difficulties. Tom Cruise makes an appearance as obscenity-spouting, malevolent studio executive who instructs a crew member to punch the director, Damien Cockburn (Steve Coogan), in the face as hard as he can. On the advice of "Four Leaf," Cockburn eventually drops his stars in the middle of the jungle, so they can experience the reality of combat, carefully staged of course.

However, the performers are dropped too close to a drug-smuggling operation and genuine mayhem ensues.

Tropic Thunder has some very funny moments. Downey is wonderful as a self-serious Australian ("I don't read the script, the script reads me") playing an African-American starring in a thoroughly false war epic ("Four Leaf," it turns out, is something less than self-advertised). Is Downey's Lazarus suffering an identity crisis? Apparently not. "I know what dude I am. I'm the dude playin' the dude, disguised as another dude!"

Cruise is somewhat frightening as the studio executive; clearly, he has a good deal of venom stored up for such figures. His character offers Speedman's agent his own private airplane at one point, in exchange for allowing his client to die at the hands of the

drug gang, so the studio can collect a huge insurance settlement, "Or...you can grow a conscience in the next five minutes and see where that takes you." It's nasty and unpleasant, and probably not too remote from the truth.

Much of the rest, however, is too broad and unfocused. Jack Black is entirely wasted. The scenes of the drug gang simply confuse. Is there a point being made here? Because of the lack of a strong theme or point of view, unwittingly perhaps, the film becomes a version of the phenomenon it set out to parody: an action film, even a semi-patriotic action film. Whatever the intentions of the creators, *Tropic Thunder's* overall treatment of its Asian characters leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Moreover, a good deal of the film's nastiness toward various and sundry targets seems nothing more than that, mere nastiness (Cockburn's fate, Speedman's beatings at the hand of the drug runners, a child being thrown through the air). There's too much in Stiller's films, as writer, director and/or actor, of the unfiltered and unthought-through. He's pandering to a good deal of backwardness, which the film industry currently encourages and thrives on.

In the name of flouting good taste and "political correctness," figures like the Farrelly brothers, Sacha Baron Cohen (*Borat*) and Judd Apatow (*Knocked Up*) too often simply display boorishness and insensitivity, with not insignificant quantities of sadism. It's not very interesting or illuminating to see their uncensored, unsavory efforts.

Tastelessness is no better than its opposite, insipid decorousness. The issue is not offensiveness or inoffensiveness, but accuracy, realism about life, in comedy as well as any other genre.

There is a relation between the lack of realism in films like *Tropic Thunder* and the absence of proportion in the writing and acting. When everything is over the top, exaggerated to the point of absurdity, nothing stands out. When every moment has to outdo the last, no moment has particular significance. Frenetic action, which doesn't correspond to the rhythm of life and our ability to take in the goings-on, possesses a static quality; it paralyzes and numbs.

Some of the problems seem to stem from laziness. When all else fails, special effects or a string of profanities. Why make films simply for adolescents, or rather a false preconception of what adolescents will like or accept?

Again, there are moments of genuine pointedness, humor and insight here, hard-hitting satire, but not nearly enough.

Woody Allen's evolution is a sadder story. His *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is flat as a pancake, without wit or substance.

Two young American women, dark-haired Vicky (Rebecca Hall) and blonde Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), arrive in Barcelona to spend the summer. A narrator explains that Vicky is "serious and stable," with a dull fiancé at home, while Cristina seeks out risk and pain. She has made a 12-minute film on the subject of "why love is so hard to define."

At an art gallery, they first see and are told about Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem), a painter still suffering from the after-effects of a stormy marriage. Later, he approaches their table at a restaurant and suggests that the three of them fly to the town of Oviato for the weekend, where "We'll eat well, we'll drink good wine, we will make love." Vicky is appalled, but in the end, offering no promises about "making love," the two women accompany Juan Antonio. Once there, the painter and Cristina quickly pair off, but a case of food poisoning lays her low, and Vicky and Juan Antonio are awkwardly thrown together. One thing leads to another between them.

Back in Barcelona, Juan Antonio abandons Vicky, because, he says, of her impending marriage, and takes up once again with Cristina, who soon moves in with him. (The narrator explains that "like all creative men," he "needed to live with a woman.") All goes relatively well, until the artist's unstable former wife, Maria Elena (Penélope Cruz), enters the picture.

With each new Allen film that isn't as embarrassing as, say, *The Curse of the Jade Scorpions*, the critics speak of a "return to form." That would be good, but it hasn't happened to be the case yet. In the first place, one shouldn't overestimate even his best movies. Allen worked over the semi-neurotic, liberal, quasi-intellectual, Jewish, New York milieu for all it was comically worth, and it was worth something, but that source dried up some time ago.

It dried up in real life, as the Giuliani-Bloomberg years set in and a good portion of the social set Allen lived among and studied became wealthy and conservative, increasingly fixed in their views and lifestyle, hostile to adventurousness in any sphere, and less and less promising as a fount of humor or analysis, even self-analysis.

The comic-writer-director attempted for years to ignore the growing divide between the fantasized Manhattan about which he continued to make films and the transformed social reality.

As we noted years ago, starting some time in the 1980s he was obliged to keep his camera tilted up in New York, above street level, to avoid the homeless on the streets and the growing social decay. Personal scandal seems to have played a role as well, in further estranging Allen from the real city and its real population.

Now he makes films in Europe, an abstract, picture postcard, upper-middle-class Europe, which is even less real.

The worst aspect of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is its attitude toward art and creativity, which is entirely superficial. The narrator and the characters speak about poetry and art and creativity, but genuine creativity has no presence in the film. Juan Antonio paints murky pictures and has nothing to say about his art

or anyone else's. He travels among people with plenty of money; his friend lends him a plane for the weekend. He drives a sports car and lives in a beautiful, elegant apartment. What is his art about? Why is he an artist?

Appropriately, the narrator *describes* in a voice-over Cristina's immersion in Juan Antonio's world of poets and artists (she has a more "European soul," the narrator informs us), this supposedly remarkable creative atmosphere. We *see* them sitting at a table in a bar with others, alleged "bohemians," but don't hear a word of the conversation. How could we? What would these people be talking about? This is an "artistic" community devoid of content, devoid of artistry or commitment of any kind. The only shot we see of a sculpture that Juan Antonio admires is fleeting and from a distance. His father is a poet, none of whose poetry we hear. Cristina's photographs are dull and uninspired.

The critics feel comfortable with this, because they travel in the same sort of complacent circles, where self-proclaimed "artists" plan out careers and marketing strategies.

Art here is reduced to a look, to a middle-class lifestyle, and the ability to impress a series of women (or men). The artist's life, apparently, primarily involves the willingness to plunge fearlessly into experiences (i.e., love affairs) and to be "open-minded," especially when it promises him or her pleasures, and not much else. There are terrible quantities of self-indulgence here. Allen is so awfully easy on himself!

If Juan Antonio is a cliché, his estranged wife is more of one. A tempestuous Latin, all nerves and wild hair and cursing, Maria Elena is a terrible caricature. It's not Cruz's fault that her performance is the most ludicrous in the film. It's an impossible role. No one could have done anything with it, because it corresponds largely to banal fantasies. Again, there is no indication that Maria Elena has any reason for painting and no thoughts in her head. Her suicide attempt is entirely predictable, as is everything else she does.

Cruz and Bardem are working all the time, unfortunately, in an effort to make something out of this series of textureless, unconvincing and undramatic episodes. Hall, the daughter of theater director Peter Hall and singer Maria Ewing, has a tiny bit more to operate with and is quite appealing. The only genuinely authentic images I can recall are a couple of Johansson, sitting and not talking in Juan Antonio's kitchen, in close-up. She looks slightly anxious, more or less like a real person might.

As we've noted before, there is absolutely nothing to gloat about in Allen's decline. He once amused and entertained us.

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