

DVD Review: The Hangover

Contributed by Trent Daniel
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The Hangover is a comedy starring Bradley Cooper, Ed Helms, Zach Galifianakis and Justin Bartha. Directed by Todd Phillips.

The Hangover is a raunchy "guy" movie in the tradition of Animal House and the Judd Apatow assembly line, yet it does not simply throw raunchy jokes at the screen to see what sticks. Instead, it sets up an intriguing premise beautifully, establishes funny characters we come to care about and smoothly transitions from one bizarre but funny scene to another as the protagonists try to uncover just what the hell happened one night in Vegas.

The premise: a bride is called on her wedding day. Bad news: the best man calls from many miles away, in the middle of the desert, to inform her that the groom is missing. He has a bloody lip and three figures are sitting on a car behind him.

Flash back 2 days: the groom (Bartha), best man Phil (Cooper), friend Stu (Helms) and brother of the bride Alan (Galifianakis) are headed to Vegas for a bachelor party. The four trade shots of Jager on the roof of the hotel. Flash photography moves ahead to the next morning. Phil, Stu and Alan awake on the floor of their now trashed hotel suite. No groom. What is in the room, however, is a chicken, a tiger, a burning chair and a baby. Furthermore, a woman is seen sneaking from the suite, Stu's tooth is missing and, when they try to check out their car, the valet brings them a police car instead.

The rest of the film feeds off this intriguing and brilliant set up. As the 3 men try to find the groom, as well as piece together exactly what happened that night, the film works as a mystery nearly as well as it works as a comedy.

The often bizarre scenes that follow work well because they are beautifully set up. I don't want to spoil all of them, but the two best ones involve a small, naked, but very mean Chinese mobster and Mike Tyson (yes, Mike Tyson). (Note: One scene that simply did not work, for me, however, involved proper use of a taser for an elementary school class. Not only was it rather mean spirited, but it stretched believability a little too far, even for a comedy such as this one.)

The film would not have worked as well as it does without strong performances by the 3 leads. In many ways, they are like a modern day 3 Stooges: Phil is clearly Moe-the leader, but not as bright as he thinks he is. Stu, who is completely under the thumb of a girlfriend from hell back home, is the Larry character-seemingly relegated to the background but actually the smartest of the 3 when given the chance. Alan is clearly Curly-almost totally insane, yet with flashes of outside-the-box ingenuity. As Alan, Galifianakis steals the movie (and this could be his breakout role). ((

The Hangover is one of the better films of 2009. While it is made in the same spirit as Animal House and Phillips' own Old School, it separates itself by offering 3 strong leads we come to care about, as well as a surprising note of mystery. It also serves a strong warning to be careful next time you are in Sin City. ((