

FILMCLIPS



TALLADEGA NIGHTS: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby

If you have to ask what Talladega is (like I did), you're probably not the market for this movie. Located in North Carolina, it's NASCAR's biggest venue, where 200,000 people can sit and watch cars drive around in a circle for hours. Which makes this the second Hollywood would-be blockbuster of the summer to woo that crowd. But if you found Pixar's *Cars* to be a bit lackluster, wait until you see what's waiting for you here. *Talladega Nights* was directed by Adam McKay with a script credited to himself and star Will Ferrell, the duo who had a hit with *Anchorman*. I say "credited" because there really doesn't seem to have been a script involved. It plays as if all involved simply assumed that the idea of Ferrell as a numbskull NASCAR racer was such comic gold that

all they had to do was turn on the cameras and the laughs would flow. The result is a badly directed and sloppily edited movie that approaches its few funny ideas like a cat watching fish in an aquarium: It sees them, it wants them, but it has no idea how to get them. The only moderately amusing note comes from Sacha Baron Cohen (star of HBO's *Da Ali G. Show*) as a gay Frenchman who competes for Bobby's title, and even he is more weird than actually funny. (His French accent can only be described as Inspector Clouseau playing Vito Corleone.) Don't just take my word for it: The tiny audience who showed up for the screening was the smallest I've ever seen for a studio preview. Docked a further point (not that it has any to lose) for sinking to a new depth in product placement: The climactic scene is actually interrupted for a commercial, featuring a fast food restaurant prominently featured in the film.

—m. faust



THE NIGHT LISTENER

It's only a coincidence that this film arrives in theaters so soon after it was revealed that writer J. T. LeRoy, supposedly an abused boy who turned his horrifying life into fiction for therapy, was actually a middle-aged woman. In fact, awareness of that event works against this movie, leading your thinking as to where the plot is heading. Inspired by an incident that happened to writer Armistead Maupin (*Tales of the City*), *The Night Listener* stars Robin Williams as Gabriel, a writer and radio personality who is approached to do a book blurb. The subject is a memoir by a teen-aged boy, Pete, who spend years being sexually abused by his parents and is now dying of AIDS. Gabriel is going through the death throes of a long-term relationship with his own lover and initially responds strongly to Pete: They become friends in long

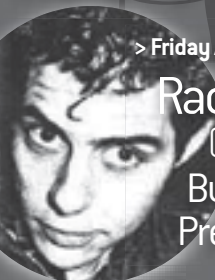
phone conversations. But something seems not quite right, and Gabriel grows obsessed with the idea that the voice he hears on the phone may actually be that of Donna (Toni Collette), his guardian. Director Patrick Stettner (*The Business of Strangers*) maneuvers the plot well enough so that it consistently twists away just when you think you see where it's going to. Williams gives one of the dour performances he trots out when he wants to be taken seriously, but it's appropriate to the material; ditto Collette's off-center turn. But the movie is all development and no payoff, as if they forgot to film the third act. Just when you think it's heading toward a climax, it's over: The credits roll at barely 75 minutes. Earlier versions were reported to run 20 minutes longer, and this film was released by the infamously edit-happy Miramax, but the problem seems to lie more in the script. If Maupin's excuse is that this is how the real story ended, then maybe he needed to do a bit more fictionalizing.

—m. faust

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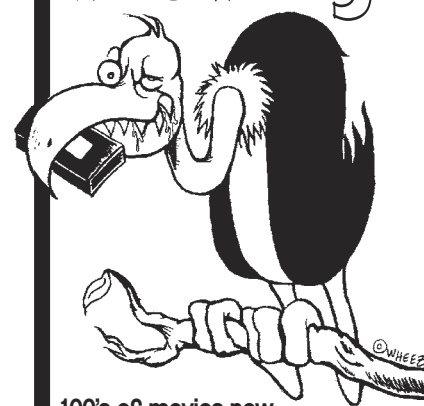
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