



Chiwetel Ejiofor in *Kinky Boots*

THESE BOOTS ARE MADE FOR GAWKING

Kinky Boots

review by George Sax

Oh, the plight of the poor drag queen in recent motion pictures. She's been pressed into service over the last decade or so as the central figure in a pulp mythology of self-sacrificial but transgressive heroism. *New York Times* writer Stephen Holden not long ago pointed out that drag queens seem to have replaced that old cinematic cliché of outsidership, the whore with the heart of gold, whose wit, wisdom, tolerance and, ahem, generosity, were always available for a movie's hero when he was down on his luck—a woman like Belle Watling in *Gone With the Wind*.

What Holden didn't note was that the W.W.H.G. usually had more fun, and more of a love life, than the movie's contemporary drag queen. Sometimes she even got the hero at movie's end—like Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express*.

From *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* over a decade ago, through the limply fey *Breakfast on Pluto* earlier this year, the drag queen has come to symbolize the sins of the rest of us, serving in movies as a martyr with courage, integrity and outrageous fashion sense. Needless to say, she virtually never gets the guy, if there is one.

Of course, the drag queen's style need not be wimpy or submissive, even if she's uplifting others' lives. Julian Jarrold's feeble new feel-good comedy *Kinky Boots* features a drag hero/heroine who's both salty and saphiric. But Lola (a.k.a. Simon) fits comfortably within the contours of this newer pop archetype. She saves not only the straight guy's life but his shoe factory, too.

Kinky Boots really belongs to that recent, sub-Ealing genre of movies about doughty, working-class Brits picking themselves up by the bootstraps—here almost literally—and triumphing over lousy circumstances (e.g. *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off*). The movie is said to be “inspired by a true story,” mind you, and sodden inspiration is its operative concept.

In the Midlands city of Northampton, Charlie Price (Joel Edgerton) is having a crisis of both conscience and business. He's the reluctant inheritor of the family shoe company, producer of carefully crafted footwear since the 19th century, and it now seems his late father had been suppressing

knowledge of the firm's perilous condition. Price occupies a dying segment of the industry; people don't want to pay for superior quality when cheap imports are readily available.

A meet-cute encounter with Lola (Chiwetel Ejiofor) on an unsuccessful trip to London to unload some product provides the impetus for a brainstorm, and a way out of Charlie's dilemma.

Lola is a six-footer and a well set-up former boxer, courtesy of her severely disapproving father's efforts to cure her of her perversion with a dose of the sweet science. When Lola notes how often her scarlet boots' heels break, Charlie suddenly sees the future: Making boots and shoes for men who dress as ladies, ones that are solidly constructed and can stand up to the demands of guys of Lola's size, even when they're worn in nightclub acts like the ones in which Lola performs in London. She also insists they meet her own design standard: vertical inches of “tubular sex.”

You just know that this business model will work, despite such obstacles as employee incredulity and resistance, not to mention provincial astonishment and belligerence when Lola pays an unscheduled visit to the factory to check up on progress. Which gives her the opportunity to shrewdly disarm prejudices, create little miracles of good will and teach slow-learner Charlie something about how to design fabulously.

Early scenes seem to indicate that Jarrold has some facility for assembling comedic scenes, but any such ability is soon drowned in a drenching wash of sentimentality. Lola/Simon is a clumsy, assembly-line construct: the brashly witty, sharp-tongued but generous-hearted and insightful queen. Ejiofor is an actor of considerable resources (he can be found plying his skills in the shadow of Denzel Washington's swaggeringly masculine performance in Spike Lee's *Inside Man*), but he can't do much more than inject a little wryness and an occasional spark of feeling into these proceedings.

Kinky Boots culminates in a mad runway show in Milan that cries out for adaptation to the musical stage or screen. We may hope no one hears and heeds this plea.



Joel David Moore and Max Minghella in *Art School Confidential*

HOW NOT TO IMPRESS GIRLS

Art School Confidential

review by M. Faust

“What you should be doing,” says teacher and struggling artist Sandy Sandiford (John Malkovich) to his student Jerome Platz (Max Minghella), “is experimenting. At your age you should try as many different things as you can.”

That seems to be the attitude with which *Art School Confidential* was made. Of course Sandy is actually trying to seduce his pupil, who ignores the oh-so-casual fingertips on his forearm and sets out to copy as many different genres as possible, all with wretched results.

It's probably only a coincidence that the filmmakers fall into the same trap as their protagonist. But then again, maybe on a subconscious level they realized that they were in the same dilemma—the desire to live up to expectations and the impossibility of fleshing out an insufficient premise.

Art School Confidential was directed by Terry Zwigoff and written by Daniel Clowes, the same team that made the delightful *Ghost World*, starring Thora Birch and Scarlett Johansson as high school misfits searching desperately for any alternative to college. That film had the benefit of springing from an ongoing body of work, Clowes' series of alternative comic books.

This new film, by contrast, is cut almost entirely from whole cloth, based on a short comic Clowes published in 1991. That left him plenty of room to add characters and a story—neither of which is exactly his strong point.

Closer to *Ghost World*'s misfit-by-default Rebecca than its genuinely off-center Enid, Jerome is a slightly built high schooler whose talent for sketching is no help in attracting any of the girls he fancies, all of whom are to be found on the arms of jocks. He sees art school as a way of bringing his talents to a world predisposed to appreciate them, or at the very least a way to meet nude models.

The film meanders for awhile as a sort of *Animal House Goes to Art School*. The students are doing nothing but learning a better vocabulary to voice their innate pretensions, while the teachers go through the motions of trying to prepare their charges for a world that will make a place for less than one percent of them (and probably not the deserving one percent, either).

This first half of the film has its moments with stale but serviceable gags about student foibles. (I enjoyed the buffet table at the student exhibition.) It doesn't take long, though, before it starts leaving a bad taste in your mouth. I can only assume that Clowes has some college experience, because the tone is awfully bitter. Like the relentlessly crude profanity that litters the dialogue, it's more grating than amusing. It certainly doesn't score any new points about the pretensions of art school (recently skewered with more finesse by HBO's “*Six Feet Under*”).

Learning that talent is less important than perception, Jerome struggles not to do the best he can but to grind out work that will impress his classmates and professors. He starts to resemble Walter Paisley, the schmeil hero of Roger Corman's horror comedy *A Bucket of Blood*, who covers corpses in clay and passes them off as sculptures at the beatnik coffeehouse where he works as a busboy. That may not be an unintended reference, as *Art School Confidential* takes a third act lurch into dark comedy with a subplot involving a strangler preying on local students.

In between *Ghost World* and this, director Zwigoff scored an unexpected hit with *Bad Santa*, a misanthropic comedy that almost never pulled its punches. *Art School Confidential* at times seems to want to go in that direction, but doesn't have the legs for it. Despite some scattered laughs, it's mostly an aimless mess of clichéd characters and underdeveloped ideas.