

# FILMCLIPS

## MONSTER HOUSE

*Monster House* is a computer animated throwback to such live action Steven Spielberg productions as *The Goonies* and *Hook*, and such Spielberg-derived fare as *The Monster Squad*. This is only appropriate, as the film lists Spielberg among its executive producers.

It's also appropriate that this children's film received a PG rating, as ten minutes into the screening I attended, a little girl cried "I'm scared!" to her father. Unfortunately, her slightly older brother was a member of the target audience, so she had to endure the remainder of the film, albeit with her hands covering her eyes. Let's not forget that the PG-13 rating was created for Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, when studio heads feared the sacrificial removal of a still beating human heart would threaten box office returns.

*Monster House* features nothing as horrifying as that, but it does possess its share of dread atmosphere and frights, especially during its early reels, before settling into a conventional roller-coaster groove. At times, it reminded me more of a Stephen King novel rendered for pre-teens than Walt Disney-type entertainment. The plot pits a trio of kids against a haunted house with an appetite for tricycles, house pets and bumbling (not to mention racially stereotyped) police officers. In the well-constructed climax, the house rampages through its residential neighborhood, a suburban nod to the giant monster flicks that no doubt thrilled Spielberg in his adolescence.

It's refreshing to see human beings as main characters again, rather than talking animals, which seems to be the trend in film. The fluid direction strikes a nice balance between chuckles and white knuckles. The film may be too scary for young kids, and may feel too long for some parents, but I would have loved it as a ten-year-old.

—greg lamberson

## MY SUPER EX-GIRLFRIEND

The recent trend of movies that focus on the emotional lives of superheroes reaches an apogee in this comedy based on the premise that folk who can stop speeding bullets, leap tall buildings and all that stuff can't necessarily be expected to be better adjusted than the rest of us schlubs. Luke Wilson stars as Matt, a Manhattan office worker who is more than a little surprised to find out that the girl he has just started dating, assistant gallery manager Jenny (Uma Thurman), is also superheroine G-Girl, whose exploits are the talk of the town. Jenny's own love life hasn't exactly been stellar, and placing her trust in Matt gives her a chance to explore some of her own sexual fantasies, which can be terrifying to a mere mortal. The terror of discovering the real meaning of "mile high club," though, fades when Matt breaks up with her because of her jealousy and possessiveness, and she sets out to use her powers to make his life hell. Cleverly scripted to tweak both superhero clichés and romantic comedies, *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* knows the value of moderation. Using just enough special effects to provide eye candy without giving you a headache, director Ivan Reitman gets equal mileage out of the Manhattan settings (the best part of his two *Ghostbusters* movies). Wilson gets great use out of his ability to play fearful, while Thurman may be the only name actress who could pull off the combination of sexiness, nerdiness and heroic panache this role calls for. Eddie Izzard is also a delight as G-Girl's arch nemesis Professor Bedlam, aka Barry, the guy she jilted in high school. The only off note comes from Rainn Wilson as Luke Wilson's bozo best friend who is perpetually offering idiotic sexist advice (a cliché that should have been retired after *Splash* and *John Candy*). That aside, this is a perfect summer popcorn movie, albeit one whose sexual themes make it inappropriate for younger children (it's closer to an R than the PG-13 it received).

—m. faust

## RED DOORS

*Sex, Lies and Videotape* was a milestone in the history of American independent movies: in 1989, it won the top award at the Cannes Film Festival and went on to become a box-office success. It made indie movies an attractive proposition for both studios and stars, because these movies could sometimes bring prestige and respect as "art-house" works with critical acclaim, and—very important—could be made for small amounts of money.

The growth of indies has also meant that it's possible to make movies that are personal and small-scale, focusing on cultural milieus that large Hollywood films either tend to ignore outright or treat in broad stereotypes. *Red Doors*, a semi-autobiographical story about a Chinese-American family in suburban New York, is a good example of this kind of intimate indie film.

The Wongs, the family in the film, have three daughters: the oldest is a successful businesswoman who is making wedding plans when she encounters an old flame, throwing her future into uncertainty. The middle daughter is a medical student who falls for a lesbian TV star who is researching a role at the hospital; the youngest is a high school senior with a rebellious streak. (When we meet her, she is wearing a T-shirt that says "God Is Dead—Nietzsche" on the front and "Nietzsche Is Dead—God" on the back.) The father, who has just retired, is going through a silent existential crisis.

Except the mother, who is garrulous and overbearing—and blithely unaware of it—the rest of the family is not given to extravagant outbursts of emotion. They live their lives in a quiet emotional solitude, while trying to figure out how to navigate their relationships and feelings and perhaps get a bit closer to each other. This is a hushed movie, but its deadpan humor keeps it from ever getting somber.

Georgia Lee, who wrote and directed *Red Doors*, was an assistant to Martin Scorsese and based this debut film on her own life. Her background is interesting: at her parents request she attended Harvard Business School, then landed a lucrative job before mustering the courage to quit and pursue her real love, filmmaking. In the movie, the father obsessively watches home video footage of his daughters, trying to nostalgically recapture the past. It's poignant to find out that this footage is from the director's own home movies from her childhood.

One strength of *Red Doors* is that it's both culturally specific in its roots in the Chinese-American experience and also universal—we all know that families are alike no matter where you go. The title of the movie refers to a Chinese belief that painting a door red invites good luck and harmony into the home. Fortune and felicity are not easily found in this film, which makes us appreciate them all the more when they appear, towards the end, as a faint and tentatively optimistic glimmer on the family's doorstep.

—ginish shambu

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