

Set on the road between Albuquerque and Redondo Beach (locations undoubtedly chosen on the assumption that audiences find the names inherently laughable), *Little Miss Sunshine* puts the troubled Hoover family in close quarters for a few days and dares us to believe that they might not survive the ordeal. These include father Richard (Greg Kinnear), trying to make a living as a motivational speaker and author despite no apparent qualifications for either job; wife Sheryl (Toni Collette), whose first marriage ended in divorce; son Dwayne (Paul Dano), who scowls at the world from under a giant poster of Nietzsche and has vowed not to speak until—well, until the end of the movie, anyway; Sheryl's brother Frank (Steve Carrell), a suicidal Proust scholar; and Richard's profane, substance-abusing father (Alan Arkin, who manages to put a fresh spin on an extremely clichéd character).

A hit at the Sundance Film Festival, *Little Miss Sunshine* uncomfortably treads a line between realism and farce. We can't really laugh at these characters because their problems and pains are all too real. When daughter Olive (Abigail Breslin) gets a last-minute slot in a regional talent show 900 miles away, it comes at the worst possible time for her financially strapped parents. That they take her the only way they can, in a barely-mobile VW bus, wins them enough grace in our eyes for us to put up with their less fine qualities. But the movie has too many rough edges to ignore, just as it resorts too often to inventing improbably despicable characters as a shorthand way of building sympathy for the Hoovers. For a movie that wants to preach the message that winning isn't everything, it lacks the nerve to let us see any of its characters as losers.

—m. faust



PULSE

Japanese horror films, known as J-horror, have almost singlehandedly rescued genre fans from a quagmire of American remakes and sequels. They tend to feature pasty-faced ghosts (usually children with pitch-black eyes and solemn expressions) and an unbearable fatalism. They're doubly unsettling for US audiences because their foreign setting makes it difficult to tell if their ambiguity stems from the supernatural or merely an alien culture. Hollywood, smelling a trend, is recycling them with blonde actresses like Naomi Watts and Sarah Michelle Gellar—heaven forbid discerning moviegoers should endure the subtitled originals. With *Ringu* and *Ju-On* already remade as *The Ring* and *The Grudge*, it was inevitable that some progressive studio would also regurgitate *Kairo*, which has garnered a following here.

Pulse is the handiwork of Dimension Films, the folks responsible for six *Children of the Corn* sequels and for running the *Hellraiser* and *Halloween* franchises into the ground. I've never seen the original *Kairo*, but I wish I had. I thought viewing the Americanized version without any preconceived notions would better enable me to evaluate its merits. Unfortunately, I had absolutely no idea what was going on for the entire running time of the picture. It seems to have been fashioned for people with phobias of the Internet, cell phones and laundry machines, and for reasons I can't fathom, these devices serve as a gateway to our world for hordes of bald ghosts that spread like the Avian flu.

Kristen Bell from *Veronica Mars*, Ian Somerhalder from *Lost* and Ron Rifkin from *Alias* are on hand to remind us that better material can now be found on TV than at the local multiplex. *Pulse* was shot with a bleached film stock that makes each character appear to have blue or green skin; there's an interracial couple in the mix, but you'd never know it looking at them. Wes Craven is credited with co-writing the screenplay, but there's no telling how many people had a hand in re-editing the final product, standard operating procedure for Dimension fare. This choppy mess is muddled and incoherent, lacking even the rudimentary logic of a video game, which it resembles.

It's obvious why Dimension didn't screen this for critics, who feel compelled to warn their readers away from such hackwork. If nothing else, I now want to see *Kairo* on DVD just to understand the plot.

—greg lamberson

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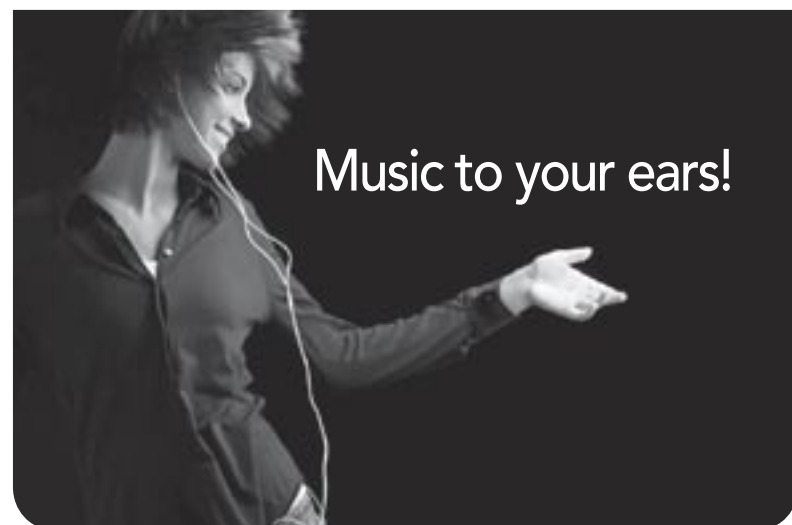
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