

Trailer Tracking: ‘Wanderlust,’ ‘Safe House,’ ‘This Means War,’ More

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CHICAGO – Now that we’re so close to the holiday season, it means that the whole movie trailer landscape has changed yet again. We’ve spent the last three months watching the previews for the Christmas season blockbusters and the end-of-the-year Oscar hopefuls nonstop. Now that their pre-release marketing window is shrinking to a close, we’re getting hit with all of the “fun” trailers from the first two months of 2012, the trailers that are supposed to inspire us to shake ourselves out of our post-New Year’s doldrums and get our asses to the multiplex.

So far, from what we’ve seen, it’s a mixed bag. There’s a lot of potential for greatness, for sure, but each of this week’s four new trailers have an equal potential to be epic train wrecks. As always, we hope for the best (yay, a new comedy from the creators of “Role Models”!) and plan for the worst (hey, it’s a new McG film... great...) But, regardless of the uncertainty, as trailer devotees, HollywoodChicago has poured over these trailers again and again until we were ready, willing, and able to let you know what we’re excited about, what underwhelmed us, and what we’re planning to avoid.

Movie: “Wanderlust”

Best Part of the Trailer: Paul Rudd being Paul Rudd.

Worst Part of the Trailer: You want me to say Jennifer Aniston, don’t you? Well, she’s not. Not at all. It’s Malin Akerman.

Our Take: If this movie was just being advertised as “Paul Rudd reunites with the team behind ‘Role Models’”, I’d already be sold. “Role Models” was a well-executed, underrated, raunchy gem of a comedy, and Paul Rudd’s performance in it stands as the closest any comedian has come recently to evoking the gleeful bastard spirit of early ‘80s Bill Murray leading roles. And, in theory, the idea of a “Role Models”-ish Rudd retreating to a hippie commune, with Jennifer Aniston in tow, sounds like high-concept comedy gold.

However, there’s a lot going on in the first trailer for “Wanderlust” that makes me doubt that the movie has the same sense of anarchic fun as “Role Models”. First, there’s the music. Yes, this is nitpicking in the extreme, but I can’t decide if it’s awesome or horrible that the trailer ends with Elvis Costello’s “(What’s So Funny ‘Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding?” On one hand, the name of the song could very well be the title of the movie. On the other hand, talk about on the nose. “Wanderlust” seems to be saying both “look at these crazy hippies!” and “what’s so wrong, in our age of fiscal collapse, with some harmless folks believin’ in Peace, Love and Understanding?” The trailer doesn’t really make up its mind on that issue, and I’m worried that the movie will be just as indecisive. A comedy like “Wanderlust” is a balancing act. To work, it’s got to be like Bill Forsyth’s “Local Hero”, where we learn to love the eccentricities of the locals while gently laughing at their inherent craziness. I will say, to director David Wain’s credit, there are moments like that in the trailer - I love Joe Lo Truglio’s “Touche!” – but other characters (looking at you, Justin Theroux) just come off like douchey hippie archetypes.

This gets into my other concern about “Wanderlust”. I will bet good money that the film’s marketing team embraces the whole Occupy Wall Street “this film is for the 99%” thing that failed so miserably for “Tower Heist” this weekend. Expect lots of ads and cast interviews where they stress how, with the housing collapse and plummeting economy, wouldn’t it be nice to just go off and live in a commune of like-minded, non-materialistic friends? They’ll consider that “tapping into the zeitgeist.” The problem is – at the moment, it would be way, way too easy to use the trailer for “Wanderlust” as an indictment of that very sentiment or of the Occupy Wall Street movement as a whole. The characters in “Wanderlust”’s commune are EXACTLY what Fox News viewers believe what the Occupy Wall Street participants look like. They’re crazy, they have no jobs, they do drugs, they’re promiscuous - even if the movie ends up as pro-commune, the commune imagery they’re providing to the public makes it way, way too easy to dismiss their way of life at a passing glance. You can get a lot of jokes out of the concept of “dirty hippies” (just as Cartman), but then you can’t ask us to suddenly love and respect the hippies in the final reel. THIS, I think, is the main challenge surrounding “Wanderlust.” And the fact that ANY of this occurred to me while watching its trailer, when I just should’ve just been thinking “Hee, hee, Rudd am funny,” is a problem. (Granted, that could just be my problem.)

And you do want me to get even more nitpicky? The FONT (yes, the font) and backgrounds that they use for the interstitial text, when the trailer tells us to “find our way”, looks exactly like the ad text from “Couples Retreat” (also starring Malin Akerman), which is EXACTLY the kind

of B.S., piss-poor self-help comedy that I hope "Wanderlust" isn't.

TRAILER OUTLOOK: Mixed bag. Rudd is a 10th-level comedy mage right now, but there were too few killer jokes and too much conceptual weirdness in the trailer to completely sell me.

Movie: "Safe House"

Best Parts of the Trailer: Some very cool car chases; Capetown is a beautiful locale; it's always nice to see Denzel go bad.

Worst Parts of the Trailer: The fact that, every time I see Sam Shepard on screen now, it reminds me of that god-awful "Swordfish"; the similarities to "Training Day"; the fact that, after this summer, seeing Ryan Reynolds on screen now makes me a little sad.

Our Take: In this next chapter in the long on-screen pairing of Denzel Washington and director Tony Scott, we find our... wait a minute... what do you mean Tony Scott didn't direct "Safe House"? What? No, look at the trailer. It's CLEARLY a Denzel/Tony Scott action movie. Wait, who or what is a "Daniel Espinosa"? (Pause for quick IMDB break.)

Well, I'll be. "Safe House" ISN'T a Tony Scott flick. It was, in fact, directed by some guy named Daniel Espinosa. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I'm just so used to seeing Denzel/Scott action flicks that, whenever I see Denzel running with a gun, I automatically assume he's embarked on yet another partnership with Ridley Scott's slightly more fun brother. But you have to admit, in terms of visuals and tone, this trailer and (I'm assuming) most of the marketing behind "Safe House" isn't interested in pointing out that this is the first English-language production of a successful Swedish filmmaker. The trailer for "Safe House" wants to let you know that this is another "Denzel goes OFF" action flick, that this is familiar territory, and it accomplishes this goal fairly well. In fact, when the trailer was done, I had two main reactions – 1). this looks like a Tony Scott film, and 2). this reminds me of "Training Day". And I bet that's exactly what the advertising team was going for. And why not? Denzel's Scott films have been some of his more successful movies at the box office and "Training Day" won him a freakin' Oscar. Finding a hybrid between the two seems like a no-brainer.

And, be honest, "Safe House" looks pretty. It looks slick and not in a completely artificial way like Bay's "Transformers" movies. The production value is high, the South African setting is cool and atypical, it's got a strangely killer supporting cast (Brendan Gleeson, Sam Shepard, Vera Farmiga, Robert Patrick), and the action looks solid – "Bourne"-esque without overindulging in Paul Greengrass-style shaky cam. At the moment, my main concern is the premise and the pairing of Denzel and Ryan Reynolds. The plot – which involves Reynolds as a green CIA officer manning a Capetown safe house who has to protect a very, very bad ex-CIA agent (Denzel) from even worse international bad guys – is so high-concept that it could almost be played as an action-comedy, a flipped-on-its-ear take on "Midnight Run". But director Daniel Espinosa apparently takes the material very, very seriously and turns Denzel into the kind of renegade, "is he bad or isn't he?" mentor that he played so well in "Training Day". And, don't get me wrong, I love it when Denzel breaks from being the stoic hero and gets his menace on, but the trailer almost makes his character seem one-note, like he's playing the "Training Day" tune all over again. I want Tobin Frost – Denzel's character, whose name is spoken in a reverent hush – to be a big, nuanced, intimidating force of nature, not just a collection of conflicting signals. (Please let the plot revolve around more than just whether or not Denzel is a reliable narrator.)

My other issue is with Ryan Reynolds, who is actually probably the lead in "Safe House." I want two things from Ryan Reynolds in "Safe House" – 1). For Reynolds' character not to be a riff on Ethan Hawke's character from "Training Day", and 2). For Reynolds to make it believable that his character is so green and naïve even though he's 35 years old. Ethan Hawke and Denzel ended up having a fantastic back-and-forth chemistry in "Training Day," but this "Safe House" preview doesn't really show off similar chemistry with Reynolds and Denzel. Let's hope that's just because this is the first of many trailers, so it can't show us everything, but I'm just not interested watching Denzel bulldoze over Reynolds for two hours. My #1 request for the next "Safe House" trailer is to see Hal Jordon put up more of a fight. All that being said, in the scope of things, there are much, much worse fates than being compared to "Training Day" and Tony Scott films. Hopefully, the next trailers for "Safe House" will show us more personality and give us a better taste of the unique action movie DNA that Daniel Espinosa (who is not, I repeat, NOT Tony Scott) brings to the table.

TRAILER OUTLOOK: Cautiously optimistic. It's a slick international thriller with car chases and a great cast. While, yes, it's a little familiar, I'll give it the benefit of the doubt... for now.

Movie: "21 Jump Street"

Best Parts of the Trailer: Jonah Hill selling jokes right and left; Ice Cube saying "Twittersphere"; Three words: Ron freakin' Swanson.

Worst Parts of the Trailer: Any part when they mention the synthetic drug "plot"; the eeriness of seeing Jonah Hill that skinny; realizing that Channing Tatum is nowhere near as funny as Mark Wahlberg.

Our Take: Admit it – this red-band trailer makes the "21 Jump Street" movie look ten times better than any "21 Jump Street" movie deserves to be. Not that the trailer is perfect, but, c'mon, a movie version of a semi-cult, failed Fox TV series from the late '80s about undercover cops infiltrating a high school? That's not an especially high bar to jump. Particularly when you remember the resounding failure of the "Mod Squad" movie that Claire Danes got caught up in back in 1999. So, at the very least, you HAVE to respect the comedic pedigree behind the new "Jump Street" movie. It's written by Jonah Hill; it stars Hill, Rob Riggle, Nick Offerman, and Ellie Kemper, among others; and it was directed by Phil Lord and Chris Miller, who created one of the most underrated animated comedies of the past decade with "Cloudy with a

Chance of Meatballs". Actually, my biggest gripe with the "21 Jump Street" trailer is that it tries to sell the movie as more of an Adam McKay/Apatow action-comedy experience, while completely ignoring the fact that the minds behind Flint Lockwood and the town of Chew and Swallow were actually behind the camera.

Speaking of Adam McKay, the trailer for "21 Jump Street" does make the film come across like a pretty close analog to McKay's "The Other Guys", with Hill playing the Will Ferrell role and Channing Tatum filling in for Mark Wahlberg. This isn't a bad model to ape – "The Other Guys" was McKay's best film since "Anchorman", and Ferrell and Wahlberg made a surprisingly potent comedy team. The "Jump Street" trailer doesn't completely sell me on Hill and Tatum's partnership (Hill seems to be doing the bulk of the heavy lifting), but there are much, much worse films for them to emulate than "The Other Guys". (My BIG worry is that, once you get beyond the drug humor and gunplay, "21 Jump Street" will turn into a more-ironic version of "Never Been Kissed".)

The "popular kids selling a synthetic drug" plot doesn't really work in the trailer – is the movie taking the threat seriously or not? – but I do love that the preview completely addresses one of the most ridiculous aspects of "21 Jump Street", i.e. the fact that Tatum's undercover high school student looks like, and I quote, "a forty-year-old man." There's a long, weird history of 30-year-old actors playing teenagers on TV and in movies, and I think it's great that Lord and Miller honed in on that inherent silliness as something to focus on. For "21 Jump Street" to work, it has to do what "The Other Guys" did so well – mock the action genre while, at the same time, delivering a fun, legitimately compelling action-comedy experience. Too often, action-comedies get caught up with the mocking and forget that no one comes to an action movie for irony alone. If "21 Jump Street" can use that irony sparingly – giving us only a few winks to the original show and creating an honestly interesting conflict – while letting Jonah Hill verbally go off as a new cop with a gun... "21 Jump Street" could work. Color me optimistic.

TRAILER OUTLOOK: Good. I want more evidence that there's some life in Hill and Tatum's partnership before I commit totally, but it looks way better than a "21 Jump Street" movie should.

Movie: "This Means War"

Best Parts of the Trailer: Tom Hardy and Chris Pine look like they have some legitimate chemistry; Wolfmother's "Woman" is a great song choice and works well; it's a pretty package; the final "why is she listening to that old man?" joke at Chelsea Handler's expense

Worst Parts of the Trailer: The fact that it has to stand comparisons to "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" and "True Lies"; the premise seems very sitcom-y; and a nutshot... really?

Our Take: Is it wrong that we feel a bit bad for McG? Granted, he's made some lousy movies, but the "This Means War" trailer doesn't even toss in a "From the director of 'Charlie's Angels'" credit, relegating his name to the very last second of the preview. On one level, I get it. This is semi-new territory for McG – a very high concept action-romance that isn't based on an existing franchise. A spy-vs.-spy comedy where two secret agents and former best pals (Chris Pine and Tom Hardy) use all the resources of the CIA to take each other down as they compete for the heart of the same girl (Reese Witherspoon). This is one of the first times that McG has been given the opportunity to create something new. (Even "We Are Marshall" was based on a true story, so there were only so many liberties he could take.) And, at least from this trailer, I get the sense that McG realizes that this is a big movie for him and you can almost feel him swinging for the fences.

Which is good. Ambition is good. And it's almost necessary when you're working on a movie that, on many levels, is going to remind people of past blockbusters like "True Lies" and "Mr. and Mrs. Smith". And, it's in those moments, the moments where it reminds us of those past mega-hits, where the "This Means War" trailer really shines. The slick, cool hitman vs. hitman stuff seems well choreographed and interesting, the cast seems to have some chemistry (it's hard to top the Arnold/Jamie Lee and Brad/Angelina chemistry of the past, though), and the dueling dates scenes remind me of the Arnold/Bill Paxton scenes in "True Lies", which were among the funniest parts of the movie. "This Means War" definitely makes for an attractive package.

However, there are a few fairly noticeable holes in this package that even the trailer can't hide. The first is a big problem with the central premise – we have to care about all three of our leads, even though they're all acting kind of like idiots. Fine, we can chalk the Pine vs. Hardy buffoonery up to damaged male egos, but Reese Witherspoon, on the other hand, has spent so much time cultivating this very sharp, very intelligent persona, both on and off-screen, that it's almost too much of a stretch to buy her as an idiot. Maybe "idiot" is too strong a term, but we have to have sympathy for her while she's, essentially, two-timing our male leads, so it's really up to McG and the screenwriters to find a way to put Reese into that predicament and make her actions seem believable and non-idiotic. The movie doesn't work if we can't understand why these two guys are blowing up half the city to be with her, so I really hope the future trailers work a little harder to make us understand Reese's decision.

The other possible hole in the package revolves around the delicate line between action and comedy. There is something really madcap, over-the-top, and borderline silly about the escalating prank war between Pine and Hardy in the trailer, and, if they nail that tone, that's amazing. Heck, the title of the movie comes from a Daffy Duck line, so there should be something loony at the core of "This Means War". That being said, it's really hard to tread the line between silly comedy and action without lapsing into parody. "True Lies" and "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" are prime examples of movies that brilliantly balanced that line. On the flip side, if you let that lunacy get out of control, you end up with Steven Spielberg's "1941", where it just turns into an orgy of bombast and craziness with nothing really behind it. I'm heartened that "This Means War" seems to be using "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" as its template of what it wants to be – Chelsea Handler is more or less playing the Vince Vaughn role – but, hopefully, McG will be able to give the film its own voice rather than just delivering his own bromance adaptation of Pitt and Jolie going to war. (Mr. and Mr. Smith, as it were.)

(All that said, I'm also interested to see when the trailers introduce the real bad guy of "This Means War" because I don't believe for a second that Pine and Hardy don't team up with Reese in the end to take down a bay guy, working their issues out along the way.)

TRAILER OUTLOOK: Definite potential, but we've been hurt by McG before. Prove to us that this isn't just a riff on the "True Lies of Mr. and Mrs. Smith" and we'll be there opening night, McGinty.

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