

Clever Cast Can't Quite Save Crazy 'Pain & Gain'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 25, 2013 - 9:43am

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Michael Bay's "Pain & Gain" tells such a ridiculous story that it has to be true. Based on the infamous case of the Sun Gym Gang, a trio of bodybuilders who committed some unspeakable, bizarre crimes, "Pain & Gain" nearly works through the sheer charisma and talent of its A-list cast. A bloated running time, Bay's problems with pacing, and a pretty juvenile script hold it back from truly clicking but there is enough manic energy to this larger-than-life story that it could practically numb one into thinking it connects as well as it should.

"Pain & Gain" will inspire film goers to consider who might have done more with the same story. What would Joel & Ethan Coen's "Pain & Gain" look like? (It would have been a dark, comic masterpiece and the lead role probably would have been played by Michael Stuhlbarg). What would Martin Scorsese's "Pain & Gain" feel like? (It would have been a star-studded, more ambitious piece with Leo in the lead, naturally.) What would Tony Scott's "Pain & Gain" have been like? (Briefly, it would have been great. This story feels made for Tony Scott.) The reason that all this speculation is fun is simple – the movie nearly works in spite of Bay and not because of him. Bay treats the people involved in this true story like CGI creations from one of his "Transformers" films and the lack of human touch on his part plays tug of war with the charisma of the cast. Bay wins. We lose.



Pain and Gain

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

"Pain & Gain" is alternately narrated by the characters at the core of its insane story of greed, violence, and murder. The lead of this parade of stupidity is Daniel Lugo (Mark Wahlberg), a man who believes that his pursuit and achievement of bigger muscles has earned him the right to the American dream of mansions, boats, and a new woman every night. He listens to infomercial star Johnny Wu (Ken Jeong) preach the differences between a "Do-er" and a "Don't-er" and he knows he's the former. But he's tired of being the physical trainer to women who won't screw him because he's not rich enough and wealthy pricks who don't appreciate what they have. He's going to steal from one of them.

The lucky guy is Victor Kershaw (Tony Shalhoub), an abrasive Colombian-Jew who owns a Schlotzsky's Deli near the airport and has enough investments to keep money in an offshore account in the Bahamas. Lugo hatches a plan to kidnap him, extort money and property from him, and send him on his way. He won't care. No harm, no foul. And Daniel and his buddies – Jesus-loving ex-con Paul Doyle (Dwayne Johnson) and impotent & annoying Adrian Doorbal (Anthony Mackie) – will just slide into the high life. Of course, things go wrong when Vic refuses to play along.



Pain and Gain

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

The rotating narrators, the bright light of Southern Florida, the half-naked world in which these people live & play – it's a good fit for a visual artist like Bay and he's certainly made a movie that looks good. Bay clearly loves the more extreme nature of his story. You can feel the glee in the filmmaking in scenes in strip clubs or a shoot-out that leaves a character toe-less. He likes over-the-top filmmaking and this is certainly an over-the-top story.

However, being "over-the-top" from first frame to last gets monotonous quickly. "Pain & Gain" is all climax. Something like Tony Scott's "True Romance" builds from its relatively calm beginnings to the insanity of the shoot-out that ends it. There's NO build in "Pain & Gain." It's all turned up to 11 and the result has a numbing effect. When Ed Harris shows up as a retired private eye asked to investigate, the film improves greatly simply by the addition of an actor who isn't being asked to play to the back row in every scene. I know it's odd to ask for subtlety in a story about killer bodybuilders but the lack of tonal shifts and complete disregard for building a story instead of just pushing it in your face defeat what could have worked here.



Pain and Gain

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

It doesn't help that Bay and his writers (Christopher Markus & Stephen McFeely) have a ridiculously juvenile sense of humor. Jokes about exploding diarrhea, homophobia, dildo jokes – it all works together to create a feeling that the creators of this movie are embracing the idiocy of its characters a bit too completely. When "Pain & Gain" goes for the grotesque or the bad taste joke, it just hits the floor because of the aforementioned tonal problems. If the movies paused to catch its breath, the more extreme jokes might actually feel extreme instead of just annoying.

I wanted "Pain & Gain" to be smarter because of the movie it could have been with exactly the same cast. Every time I was willing to give up on the film completely, something that Wahlberg or Johnson or Harris or Shalhoub would do would catch me off-guard. It's a smart, smart cast here, and none of the reason for its near-miss status falls at their feet. In fact, the movie would have been a lot worse without it. Like Lugo and his lunkhead friends, "Pain & Gain" reaches for the top and falls just short.

"Pain & Gain" stars Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson, Anthony Mackie, Ed Harris, Tony Shalhoub, Rebel Wilson, Ken Jeong, Bar Paly, and Rob Corddry. It was directed by Michael Bay. It is rated R and opens on April 26, 2013.



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