

School For Scoundrels doesn't make the grade

School for Scoundrels

Directed by Todd Phillips
Starring Billy Bob Thornton, Jod Heder and Jacinda Barrett
Empire Theatres
Opens Friday, 19 September

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Napoleon Dynamite's Jon Heder plays Roger, a meek meter maid in *School for Scoundrels*, a remake of the 1960 film starring Ian Carmichael. Mouth-breathing, virginal and prone to panic attacks as well as fainting spells, Roger mirrors pretty much what audiences expected from Andy Stitzer in *40-Year-Old Virgin* to be like, before they actually saw the movie and realized that it was packed with creativity, humour and compassion. Unfortunately, though, that's where the comparisons end: entertaining qualities are what *School for Scoundrels* sorely lacks.

When Roger gets booted out of the Big Brothers program for the third time—being just too uncool for underprivileged kids to be seen around—a buddy (played by the underused David

Cross) suggests a super-secret class run by the enigmatic Dr P (Billy Bob Thornton).

Using teaching techniques that include inciting random acts of violence and close-range paintball injuries (and possibly sexual assault, in one of the film's ugliest and least-funny jokes), Dr P and his threatening henchman Leshar (Michael Clarke Duncan) seek to inspire blubbering chumps like Roger to not only gain the confidence to act like men, but also the social obliviousness to act like *obnoxious* men. "You are lions!" Dr P screams to his class of misfits, wimps and abused husbands, showing a picture of a giant cat tearing into a helpless animal. The picture serves to elucidate that Dr P wants his students to be strong enough to beat down on the weak, rather than becoming actual contributing individuals in society.

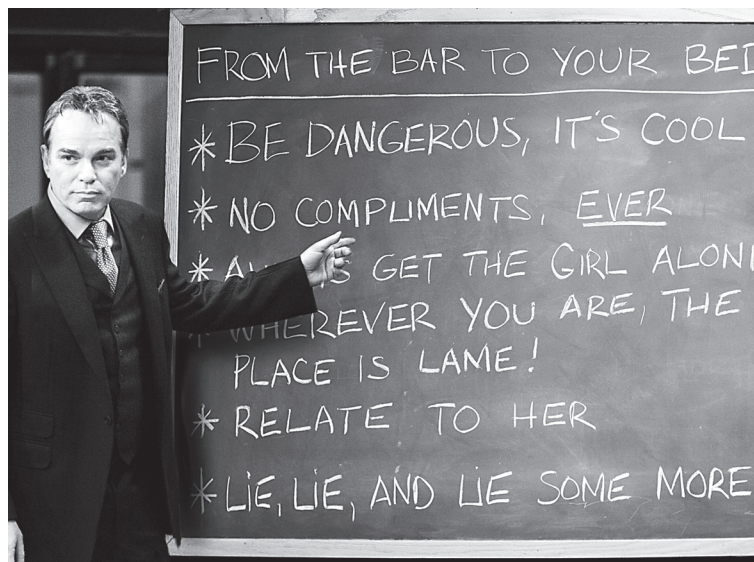
Roger takes to the program like a fish to water, eventually growing the balls to ask out Amanda, the girl of his dreams (*The Last Kiss's* Jacinda Barrett). However, his unprecedented success apparently awakens the competitive edge in Dr P, who proceeds to go after

the same girl with all the advantage of his experience. The game, such as it is, is on.

While Thornton, in real life, is by no means as awful as Dr P, he's exceedingly unexceptional. The supporting cast does the best it can to keep the film's flagging energy alive. Sarah Silverman is venomously amusing as Amanda's sarcastic roommate, and Ben Stiller pops by in an inspired cameo that nearly steals the entire film.

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However, Jon Heder is probably the worst casting choice of the entire movie. With his heavy breathing, jutting lower lip and inability to close his mouth without visible effort, he



succeeds in convincing us that he's a dweeb, but not that he's a romantic hero who's truly learned how to hold his own in a world of hard knocks. He's not believable as a confident leading man, and is too unsettling and creepy to garner much empathy.

The film runs through the spectrum of bad humour, from the traditional (ball to the groin) to the unnerving

(Michael Clarke Duncan as a rapist), with only a few good-natured laughs squeezed in between mediocrity and banality. What's supposed to be the funniest set-up of the film, the fact that Dr P's "school" is really teaching men to act like asshats, comes off a little stale—mainly because most of the characters are already asshats, and need no encouragement.

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