



COMEDIES



in the Library Service

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Comedy is a genre many people overlook when making a film selection. In my opinion this is a mistake as this is a stimulating genre and steers the viewer away from the sombre, violent and often depressing themes the more serious films expose us to. Comedies allow us to have a good laugh, but some of them take a look at issues people deal with in their daily lives and add an element of humour to situations that allows one to see the lighter side.

The Library Service has built up a large collection of outstanding films over the years which include a number of comedies. Directors such as Woody Allen, Charles Crichton and Jerry Zucker have produced some of the best comedies released on film. Films that have been directed by all three directors can be found in the Library Service collection and have been rated as some of the best titles in this genre by international professional film critics.

Library staff should make their users aware of the availability of films in the comedy genre and expose them to the pleasure of experiencing the relaxing, lighthearted films on offer. I think library users will benefit from the selection of our top-notch comedies - after all, laughter is the best medicine!

Airplane! / producer, Jon Davison; directors, Jim Abrahams, David Zucker and Jerry Zucker.

Airplane! is a comedy that uses a constant stream of gags at the expense of many big Hollywood dramas. The film uses the plot devices from other, more serious films, to maximise the comic effect of its own dialogue and physical comedy, much like the *Scary Movie* series of recent years. Stewardess Julie Hagerty and loser Robert

Hays take the lead roles as a lovelorn couple forced together by fate, on a flight of utter mayhem. Sometimes the movie loses some of its gusto but before you can lose interest another gag is on the way! The formula used in **Airplane!** has become a familiar one but the movie is still a hoot with its fine line between high drama and over the top humour. It also expects a certain amount of intelligence from the audience, which makes it that much better! (Almar Hafliadason).

A fish called Wanda / producer, Michael Shamberg; director, Charles Crichton.

The story centres on a quartet of jewellery store robbers. George (Tom Georgeson) is the ringleader, the man who has masterminded the theft. He is assisted by his stuttering, animal-loving friend, Ken (Michael Palin), and his girlfriend, Wanda (Jamie Lee Curtis). But Wanda wants the loot all to herself, and, to aid her in getting it away from George, she brings her psychotic, Nietzsche-reading lover, Otto (Kevin Kline) into the gang. After the heist is successfully completed, Wanda and

Otto place an anonymous call to the cops, and George is arrested. But, before he's hauled off to prison, he hides the stolen jewels where Wanda and Otto can't find them.

In order to reduce his sentence if he's found guilty, George hints that he might be willing to reveal the location of the jewels to his barrister, Archie Leach (John Cleese). As a result, the next step in Wanda's plan is to seduce Archie, a mild-mannered lawyer looking for a little romance and excitement. And Wanda, along with a jealous Otto, are on hand to do more than add just a little spice to Archie's existence. Soon, he's embroiled in the hilarious caper, and as the situation grows progressively more convoluted, he learns that stolen jewels can make for very strange bedfellows.

I don't want to spoil the best parts of the movie for anyone who hasn't seen it, but suffice to say that **A Fish Called Wanda** contains some of the funniest scenes of any 1980s movie. One, which features Cleese in top panic-attack form, has Archie facing his wife (Maria Aitken) while his would-be mistress hides behind the couch. Another features Otto using his most memorable line, 'Don't call me stupid', in unforgettable circumstances. Then there's Ken, who keeps on trying to kill an old lady, but ends up picking off her canine pets instead.

Nothing is sacred to Cleese, who flouts every possible definition of political correctness by satirising homosexuals, the British, the Americans, and stutterers. And, just to prove that he's got nothing to hide, Cleese does one of the most sidesplitting stripteases ever to appear on screen. It's not erotic, but what happens immediately afterwards will have you doubled over with laughter.

Despite the non-stop zaniness, Cleese manages to fashion his screen persona into a likable hero. We quickly come to sympathise with Archie, an appealing loser who's finally getting a chance to break out of the constrictive shell that has held him



back all his life. As Wanda, Jamie Lee Curtis exudes a playful sexiness. Kevin Kline creates a hilarious Otto; a self-styled 'intellectual' who's so stupid that he thinks the London Underground is a political movement. Finally, there's ex-Monty Python Michael Palin, who has lots of fun with his character's speech impediment.

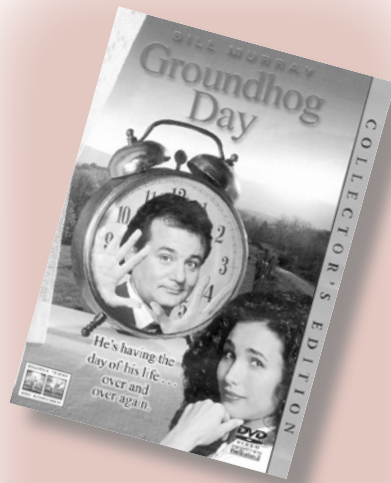
A Fish Called Wanda is one of the best-constructed, funniest, and cleverest comedies to grace motion picture screens in recent years. It's outrageous, offensive, and even a little sick - and all the more enjoyable because of it. John Cleese has spent his entire career rejecting conventional comedy, and, on this occasion, there's no denying that he has hit pay dirt (James Berardinelli).

Groundhog Day / producers, Trevor Albert and Harold Ramis; director, Harold Ramis.

The date is February 2 and the place is Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh weatherman Phil Connors (Bill Murray), on hand to cover the Groundhog Day ceremony, is having one of the most unpleasant experiences of his life. It's one of those days when Murphy's Law seems to be in full effect. But Phil soon discovers that things are even worse than they first seemed, because for him, and him alone, time has stopped. Now, he's trapped in a bizarre time loop that forces him to re-live Groundhog Day over and over, with no hope of reprieve or release, and no way of explaining the situation to anyone else since he's the only one who realises what's happening.

It's *deja vu* gone mad. **Groundhog Day** is one of the most original comedies to grace the silver screen. With as much repetition as there is, it would be easy for the film to get bogged down. Solid directing, combined with judicious editing, eliminates this problem. The only time we see a scene repeated is when there's something new added, and even then we are re-shown little more than what's necessary for the effect.

The humour is of a higher calibre than that found in most so-called comedies. Absent are the inane sight gags and puns of films like **Hexed** and **Loaded weapon 1**. Instead, **Groundhog Day** finds its humour in situations and characters. Making use of Bill Murray's talent as a comedian, the film encourages him to play off of the more serious Andie MacDowell. While the chemistry between them isn't smouldering, they work well together. Their characters' romance is credible because it's low-key.



Groundhog Day isn't a science fiction or fantasy film, so it's not interested in answering the technical questions of how the time loop came about, or what might happen if Phil stayed up all night. Instead, it presents the situation to the audience on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. I'll wager that there are few who will choose the latter option.

With all of the formula-driven, painfully unfunny comedies available, it's a pleasure to uncover something as unique as **Groundhog Day**. This movie has all the qualities necessary to be a crowd-pleaser: likable characters, charismatic performers, a strong, capably-executed premise, and lots of laughs (James Berardinelli).

Mighty Aphrodite / producer, Robert Greenhut; director, Woody Allen.

The story opens with Lenny and wife Amanda (Helena Bonham Carter, *sans* period costumes and British accent) discussing

adoption. Lenny doesn't want a child, but Amanda does, although she isn't willing to sacrifice a year of her life to have one the normal, biological way. Eventually, Lenny gives in and the couple gets a healthy male infant, whom they name Max. As the child grows and Amanda becomes more wrapped up in her attempts to procure her own art studio, Lenny fights a growing curiosity to learn more about his son's natural mother. Eventually, he sneaks a peek at the adoption agency's records. This leads to a meeting with Linda Ash (Mira Sorvino), the woman who gave birth to Max. Much to Lenny's dismay, she turns out to be a statuesque blonde with a helium voice and little in the way of intelligence. Worse still is how she makes her living - her dual career involves starring in porn films and turning \$200 tricks for a bald-headed, homicidal pimp.

Woody Allen really only has one on-screen personality, and he plays it here as usual, although, at this point in his career he's getting a bit old for roles better suited to someone twenty years his junior: Helena Bonham Carter, taking time out from Merchant/Ivory type productions, gives a snappy turn as a contemporary American woman. The only noticeable acting blot on **Mighty Aphrodite** is Michael Rapaport, who displays the same lack of range and energy he showed in **Higher Learning**.

The shining star is, without a doubt, Mira Sorvino (**Amongst Friends, Barcelona**), giving the finest performance of an as-yet short career. Since Jennifer Tilly earned an Oscar nomination for an inferior portrayal of a character of similar intelligence in **Bullets over Broadway**, Sorvino deserves at least that much - if not more. This is a star-making outing by one of America's top young actresses.

The most original element of **Mighty Aphrodite** is the use of the Greek Chorus. However, what starts out as a clever, innovative device quickly becomes tedious through overuse. The Chorus seems always to be on hand to make pithy remarks, and their presence becomes intrusive. At times, it's as if Woody Allen is attempting to take a page out of the **Monty Python** book, and those two very different styles of humour do not mix well.

While not up to the level of many of Allen's recent films, **Mighty Aphrodite** is nevertheless an entertaining diversion. The comedy, most of which is light and easily accessible, is worthy of some laughs, and the movie has a good sense of irony. **Mighty Aphrodite** is far from a *tour de force*, and

some Woody Allen die-hards may be disappointed, but there's enough in this picture to recommend it (James Berardinelli).

Best in show / producer, Karen Murphy; director, Christopher Guest.

Many people, this reviewer included, believe **This is Spinal Tap** to be the funniest film of all time. So when you hear that dopey guitarist Nigel Tufnel, alias actor/writer/director Christopher Guest, is ready to unleash another slice of 'mock-doc' on the world, it is fair to expect great things.

And you won't be disappointed. This time, the backstage shenanigans of an eighties rock band are replaced with the surreal world of professional dog shows. Among its oddball citizens are Gerry and Cookie Fleck (Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara), a buck-toothed wet blanket and ex-nymphomaniac respectively; a neurotic, overly-competitive couple; and a gay couple - perhaps the only really happy ones of the bunch.

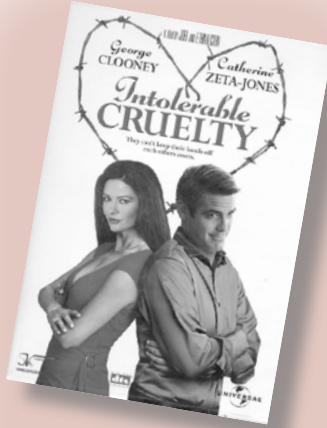
Brilliantly observed, acerbically funny, **Best in show** is even more impressive for the fact that it is largely improvised, a fact that should remind everyone that the whole cast deserve equal acclaim for the non-stop laughs. Managing to take the mickey out of a pretty absurd pastime, it also maintains affection for its subjects other similarly-themed movies fail to do.

It would be unfair to compare it point blank with the pure genius that is **Tap**, but suffice to say, while this may not have the same effect on the cultural landscape that the former did, this remains a unique, entertaining, and most importantly, incredibly funny film (Ben Falk).

Intolerable cruelty / producers, Ethan Coen and Brian Grazer; director, Joel Coen.

While **Intolerable cruelty** is a few shades lighter than the Coen brothers' best work, any objections about lowbrow condescension are swiftly overruled in 99 minutes of high class action. What's more, let the record show that it surpasses the precedent set by Hepburn versus Grant in the case of **Bringing up baby** (1938).

George Clooney is hotshot divorce attorney Miles Massey, and Catherine Zeta-Jones his latest courtroom casualty - gold-digger Marilyn Rexroth. After stumping her efforts to fleece husband Rex Rexroth (Edward Herrmann), she sets about taking revenge. Oh, and oil baron Howard Doyle's hand in



marriage (that's Billy Bob Thornton playing it like JR on Prozac, folks).

When Marilyn approaches Miles to outline their prenuptial agreement, he's right to smell a rat. But it's not long before the sweet scent of love is overpowering his senses.

Clooney is pitch perfect, matching Cary Grant for impeccable comic timing and deadpan delivery. Equipped with the Coens' trademark snap-crackle dialogue, he zips through the gags so fast you might actually spot his feet leaving the ground. Although lacking the whiplash tongue of Katharine Hepburn, Zeta-Jones offers a neat counterbalance, like a slow-burning flame alongside Clooney's storming performance.

The transparency of her deception can sometimes dent the credibility of their burgeoning love, although that's actually a fault of the script. The final verdict? On the charge that **Intolerable cruelty** is one of the most inspired, scathing, and downright side-splitting comedies to come out of Hollywood in 2003: Guilty (Stella Papamichael).

The comedies in the Library Service collection are of the highest quality and will certainly provide loads of entertainment to the users. I am sure that people will find these movies relaxing and explore the genre with more interest in the future. There are many more titles in the collection to choose from - a few follow below.

Other comedy titles on DVD

- Amelie
- Anchorman: the legend of Ron Burgundy
- Arsenic and old lace
- As good as it gets
- Bend it like Beckham
- East is East

Sources

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