



4/5 1 STAR WARS EPISODE VII: THE FORCE AWAKENS

SCI/FI \$910 MILL BO 4134 SCREENS PG-13 135 MINUTES

Daisy Ridley (TV—MR. SELFRIDGE, SILENT WITNESS, TOAST OF LONDON)

John Boyega (TV—MAJOR LAZER, 24, BECOMING HUMAN)

“Luke Skywalker has vanished” read the first words of the iconic yellow-text scroll we’ve come to expect from each new entry in the *Star Wars* franchise, and with them J.J. Abrams has established a framework from which to construct the inaugural entry of this new trilogy: a search for the past that allows for liberal borrowing from its extant

mythology’s proven strengths.

The Force Awakens is another of Abram’s competent, reverential, and blessedly humorous reconstitutions of an established fantasy world, this time with an added benefit of the inherent, deep-seated emotional attachment many have to this particular constellation of characters and milieus. There’s a new crop of heroes and villains here, but they’re all directed to seek counsel from the old ones, a tact that both serves to elegantly fill in some narrative gaps in the 30 years that have elapsed since 1983’s *Return of the Jedi*, and form an extended metaphor for Abrams’s own earnest recycling of the story structure and dramatic beats of George Lucas’s original film.

The plot here is a basic inversion of 1977’s *A New Hope*. This time it’s a female protagonist, Rey (Daisy Ridley), who’s winning her life away on some desert planet until the arrival of a messenger droid (a cute tag-along, BB-8, that’s more WALL-E than R2D2) sets her on a mission to deliver a map with Luke Skywalker’s whereabouts. And her male counterparts are this film’s joint Leia surrogates: a pilot, Poe Dameron (Oscar Issac), who’s taken prisoner by the First Order (formerly the Empire), and a rogue stormtrooper-with-a-conscience, Finn (John Boyega), who frees him.

A series of divine coincidences leads three of these four characters (Poe is estranged from the rest of the cast for much of the film) aboard the Millennium Falcon, which leads, like a homing beacon, to the smuggling freighter of its former owners, Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) and Han Solo (Harrison Ford). The new baddies—including a constantly screaming General Hux (Domhall Gleeson), the Vader-masked Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), and a CGI hybrid of Galactus and Voldermort known as Supreme Leader Snoke—pursue our heroes, and inevitably, a certain series-rhyming casualty follows.

The film exists less as a meaningful extension of its world than as a fan-service deployment device.

Abrams is with little doubt the best director to helm these familiar beats since the late Irvin Kershner, and if his franchise entry doesn’t boast *The Empire Strikes Back*’s particularly potent concoction of drama or space-opera romantic sweep, it does serve as an always welcome corrective to the current franchise climate of gloomy self-seriousness, calibrating its tonal alchemy to *Spaceballs*-worthy silliness (“I can’t understand you in that mask”) with a surprising, and welcome, frequency.

This levity makes it difficult to find too much fault in the film even when it exists less as a meaningful extension of its world than as a fan-service deployment device, in part because every eye roll-worthy moment (*another* Death Star to destroy?) is preempted by the film’s own built-in eye-roll response gag (“...but bigger!”). Also because its affectionate call-backs are doled out with such underlying competence, from the fleet narrative’s clean, three-act structure, to the convincingly deployed iconic visual grammar of wipes and agile dolly shots, to the strength of the performances. Ford, in particular, is better here than he ever was in the original trilogy, taking to his role as sage veteran and guide with a wiliness and scrappy, irreverent charm that informs the character of the film itself.

But *The Force Awakens* is still more or less a fetish object, a film that exists to inspire phrases like “It feels like *Star Wars* again” ad nauseam from a fanbase that equates the lasting impact of Lucas’s prequels as something akin to PTSD. Its analog grain, practical effects work (shrewdly augmented with CGI), and the impression, at least, of a new story in this universe being told, rather than the predetermined one we were subjected to last time, lend Abrams’s effort a baseline rejuvenation, one he and returning screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan stoke throughout with the kind of nostalgia this series has been exploiting since it first co-opted John Fordian vistas and plot points from Akira Kurosawa films. The strategy works because mining mythology gives the impression of discovery, but



one hopes that having thoroughly dredged that particular well for all possible returns, the next *Star Wars* installment may go looking for this franchise's future instead of safely dwelling in its past.

This will be as huge as **THE MARTIAN, EVEREST, ANT-MAN, TED 2, TRAINWRECK, JURASSIC WORLD and MINIONS.**



4/5 3 TUMBLEDOWN DRAMA
\$2 MILL BO 349 SCREENS R 102 MINUTES

Rebecca Hall (RUMINATE, TRANSCENDENCE, EVERYTHING MUST GO, THE TOWN)

Jason Sudekis (SLEEPING WITH OTHER PEOPLE, HORRIBLE BOSSES 2, WE'RE THE MILLERS, THE CAMPAIGN)

Reviewing a Nicholas Sparks'-related film is not a happy assignment because of its near-guarantee of maudlin, tear jerking sentiment. Hooray! Because *Tumbledown* is the anti-Sparks romance, nothing to do with his weepers, in fact a hard-nosed but sympathetic study of Hannah's (Rebecca Hall) writing a biography of her notably- accomplished folk-singer, late husband's short life.

Although this summary might seem Sparksean, it is not that at all. Perhaps the innocence and originality of the production comes from its freshman director, Sean Mewshaw and his collaborating writer, his wife, Desiree Van Til. Both are gifted and devoid of the penchant for cliché so dominant in other romances.

This realist-oriented romance finds Hannah struggling with her writing and her business-associate, a college professor, Andrew (Jason Sudekis). Although a certain element of formula must be present as she insults him regularly (a sure sign they will fall in love), it is 90 min before they kiss—another Hooray! During this first 2/3, most of the dialogue is rapid and sardonic, a sweetness to my word-addicted ears.

Moments occur in this dialogue-driven segment when I am reminded of the early 20th century love of screwball comedic repartee. The rapid fire insults and witticism are nectar to those of us who have grown up on Jud Apatow's romcoms potty humor and pratfalls. While *Tumbledown* has its moments of pratfalls and excessive dialogue, overall it is balm for the ears, and, given the attractiveness of Hall and Sudekis, a sight for sore eyes.

Because I lived for a year in Northern Maine, I must laud the picture's artists for capturing small town Maine life without parodying its apparent narrowness and gruffness. A warm interior lies at the center of the outwardly hostile natives; it's a warm interior that catches heat from the ubiquitous fireplaces (we had wood stoves). Visitors from the city like Andrew and his girlfriend, Finley (Dianna Agron), may just never qualify for residency the way Hannah does.

Will rent as well **DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL, IRRATIONAL MAN, MISSISSIPPI GRIND, AMERICAN ULTRA, and I'LL SEE YOU IN MY DREAMS.**





4/12 1 **THE FOREST** \$29 MILL BO
2146 SCREEN PG-13 93 MINUTES

**Natalie Dormer (THE HUNGER GAME: MOCKINGJAY 2, THE RIOT CLUB, THE COUNSELOR, FLAWLESS)
Stephanie Vogt (TV---ENTOURAGE, ROYAL PAINS, C.S.I. MIAMI)**

The last time Sara (Natalie Dormer) spoke to her identical twin sister, Jess, a teacher working in Japan who goes missing in the Aokigahara forest, she sounded “off.” That’s one way of describing the opening minutes of Jason Zada’s *The Forest*, which articulates Sara’s disquiet with the dull eloquence of a perfume commercial. In Tokyo, Sara peers in frozen apathy at the neon wonderland photogenically reflected against her taxi cab’s window. But as this self-conscious sizzle reel continues to pick up transmissions from past and near-future moments, of Sara packing her bags stateside and bidding adieu to her beau, Rob (Eoin Macken), and later encountering a man who informs her of Aokigahara’s status as a suicide destination, it comes to reflect less the character’s driftwood-like existence than the filmmakers’ impatient drive to get down to their jump-scare-a-thon duties as quickly as possible.

The Forest is constantly torn in two directions, toward the past, where Sara and Jess’s trauma over the loss of their parents is rooted, and the present, inside a forest whose cultural value to Japan is trivialized in the film’s bum-rush to liberate, however horrifically, the twins from their agonies. Inside a bar near Aokigahara, Sara meets an Australian travel reporter, Aiden (Taylor Kinney), to whom she misrepresents the nature of her parents’ demise. She describes a drunk driver’s rampage, but the truth is a murder-suicide, which is so tawdrily revealed on screen that Dormer is effectively denied from tinging Sara’s telling misrepresentation with anything resembling pathos. In the end, the character’s false confession is one of many exposition dumps that gingerbread-crumbs the narrative toward its obligatorily cheap closing beat.

Sara and Jess’s duet of pain is, on the surface, a complicated show of codependence, informed by what the latter saw and the former didn’t on the night of their parents’ death, and it’s cannily linked to the mythos of Aokigahara, a place abundant in death and, of course, ghosts that bring out one’s fears. Sara dutifully treks into the forest to look for Jess with Aiden’s help, and after predictably refusing to stay on the marked path, per their guide Michi’s (Yukiyoshi Ozawa) instructions, ghosts come to prey on the sadness that grips her heart through one false vision after another. If there’s any resonance to her journey into the dark recesses of the night, and as such the past, it’s cheapened by how the sisters’ anguish is so bluntly stated through dialogue and reflected in their very personas; if Sara is a square peg, then Jess, mostly seen in flashbacks, is her emo flipside.

Though one never believes that Dormer is playing two different individuals, it’s difficult to imagine any actress emerging from the film’s cavalcade of recycled shlock, all flickering fluorescent lights and face-mutating ghoulies, with a more clearly delineated sense of the sisters’ personalities. The film, whose exteriors were mostly shot in Serbia, captures the ethereal pall of Japan’s infamous suicide forest at the base of Mount Fuji with minimal fuss, though there’s little, not even the context of Jess working at a school, that can excuse the story’s Big Bad taking the hackneyed form of a uniformed high school girl. In downplaying their backstory in the interest of delivering cliché thrills, the filmmakers ironically succeed at likening the twins to the very fraudulence of the things that go bump in the forest’s night.



This will rent as well **THE VISIT, FANTASTIC FOUR, INSIDIOUS 3, TOMORROWLAND, and POLTERGEIST.**



4/19 3 THE LADY IN THE VAN COMEDY
\$6 MILL BO 19.69 PG-13 104 MINUTES

**Maggie Smith (TV—DOWNTON ABBEY—FILM—THE SECOND BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL, QUARTET, HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HOLLOWES 2, THE FIRST WIVES CLUB)
Jim Broadbent (BROOKLYN, GET SANTA, THE IRON LADY, BRIDGET**

JONES' DIARY)

Maggie Smith carries herself like a countess in this “mostly true story” about a homeless woman in London, while hinting at a deep well of remorse and shards of panic beneath her grand froideur. In a kind of literary bait and switch, however, *The Lady in the Van* isn't really about the supercilious Miss Shepherd (Smith), but the fastidious, somewhat timid, and reclusive playwright Alan Bennett (Alex Jennings), the author of this screenplay, in whose driveway Miss Shepherd parked her van for more than 15 years.

Observing his initially unwelcome neighbor through his picture window, or addressing her in formal, borderline adversarial exchanges, which are usually confined to pragmatic questions like whether he will let her use his bathroom, Bennett learns only a handful of facts about Miss Shepherd. The film shows or tells its audience those nuggets repeatedly as Bennett muses in self-consciously “literary” prose about what she teaches him about life or whether he should turn her story into a book or a play. Meanwhile, its real subject, Bennett himself, neither says nor does anything particularly interesting.

“Writing is talking to oneself,” Bennett states, and the script illustrates that valid, if unoriginal, insight with literal-minded voiceovers from and arguments between Bennett the man of the world and Bennett the writer. The two often share the screen, the writer sitting at his desk by the window, either writing or critiquing what his alter ego does. The worldly Bennett doesn't do much more than the writer, and what little he does is conveyed mainly through his narration or through brief snippets of his interactions with other people.

That combination of quippy voiceover with attenuated action keeps the audience at almost as great a distance from Bennett's inner life as we are from Miss Shepherd's. As a result, when something about his relationship with Miss Shepherd—presumably his quest to figure out how she became so disconnected and alone—makes him realize that there needs to be more to his life than just working, caring for his aging mother, sparring with his aging neighbor, and having one-night stands with a series of young men, Bennett's change of direction is more comprehended than felt.

The other characters all talk in the same multisyllabic, often meta mode that Bennett favors in voiceover, like when one of this neighbors, talking about how aging gracefully is probably not in the cards for Miss Shepherd, says: “That's what happens in plays. In life, going downhill is an uphill job.”

This one will do as well as **LEARNING TO DRIVE, GRANDMA, FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD, 5 FLIGHTS UP,** and **INTO THE WOODS.**





4/19 2 NORM OF THE NORTH FAMILY
\$18 MILL BO 2123 SCREENS PG 90 MINUTES

VOICES OF ROB SCHNEIDER , HEATHER GRAHAM

Every time I think I'm over being surprised at the crap that some studios expect parents to shovel into their kids' faces, they manage to outdo themselves. The latest insult to children's tastes is **Norm of the North**, courtesy of Splash Entertainment, better known for their tie-in videos for Bratz dolls and a blink-and-you'll-miss-it theatrical release of a CGI **Strawberry Shortcake** movie. So this is their first "real" movie, but they're not a studio known for making anything other than cheap cash-ins on a market segment that has yet to build up any real defenses against commercial pandering. And that sensibility comes across in the

writing, which comes primarily from a pair of (I'm assuming, from their names) brothers who once wrote direct-to-video sequels to the already-bad live-action Scooby-Doo movies.

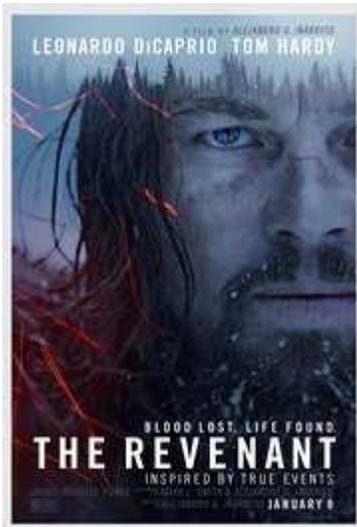
On top of that, it's a Rob Schneider movie. Don't worry, he's still putting out lazy, puerile garbage for overgrown middle-schoolers; **The Ridiculous Six** is doing quite well on Netflix, evidently. But as his movie career has faded he seems to have picked up a sideline doing voice work for, well, cheap computer-animated toy tie-in cartoons. Thankfully his usual adolescent sense of humor doesn't carry over, though one of the very few oblique references aimed at anyone over six in the audience turns out to be a gay joke. Seriously.

So the Arctic is in trouble, which kids might have heard about from the news. Except the danger isn't climate change; it's an overzealous developer (Ken Jeong) who wants to install pre-fabricated architectural monstrosities for some reason called "condos". His director of marketing, Vera (Heather Graham), comes up with the idea of a polar bear mascot to drive interest in the venture. Which is where Norm (Schneider) comes in: as one of two polar bears who -- no explanation even attempted -- are able to "speak human", he wants to get the mascot job and bring down the project from the inside.



These are signs that the producers, at best, do not care about your children beyond exploiting them for profit. Telling a worthwhile story is secondary to providing moment-by-moment distractions. Throw in some indestructible lemmings as a cheap rip-off of **Despicable Me's** minions; kids seem to love them. Pad out a slow bit with a random mass-produced pop song they might recognize.

This will rent as well as **PIXELS, MAX, DESPICABLE ME 2, HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2 and GOOSEBUMPS.**



4/19 1 THE REVENANT ACTION
\$161 MILL BO 3711 SCREENS R 156 MINUTES

Leonardo DeCaprio (SHUTTER ISLAND, INCEPTION, THE AVIATOR, THE DEPARTED, THE WOLF OF WALL STREET) Tom Hardy (LEGEND, MAD MAX: FURY ROAD, THE DROP, THE DARK KNIGHT RISES)

A spiritual view of the natural world clashes with the animalistic drives of a fallen humanity in Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's operatic wilderness survival tale, *The Revenant*. This freewheeling adaptation of Michael Punke's novel about fur trappers, Indians, and soldiers tangling in primal ways on the Western American frontier in the 1820s stretches the limits of endurance in more ways than one.

Inarritu's film pushes against known boundaries of art, suffering, and revenge tale.

The seeker of vengeance here is Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio), a white frontiersman stuck between two worlds. For scholars of the Old West, the real-life Glass is an already totemic figure whose daring exploits as a fur trapper along the war-torn Missouri River were legendary and already accreted with fantastical exaggeration during his lifetime. Having lived with a tribe for some time, Glass had an Indian wife and starts the film with an Indian son, Hawk (Forrest Goodluck).

This leaves him suspect in the eyes of his fellow trappers, particularly John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy), who doesn't bother hiding his contempt for "tree n—s". The divergence between Glass' stoic nature and Fitzgerald's venal sleaze is starkly drawn right from the start. If only it was enough to string along an entire film.

After a gut-wrenching Indian raid on the hunters' camp—captured with alternatingly quiet and fiery poetry by Inarritu's usual cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki—a few survivors strike out into the wilderness with their leader Andrew Harry (Domhnall Gleeson). An atmosphere of doom prevails, helped along by Glass' flashbacks to a raid by soldiers (either American or French, as both appear to be operating in this contested wilderness) on his old Indian village left his wife dead and him barely half-alive.



Glass' situation becomes increasingly dire after getting stuck between a mother grizzly bear and her cubs. The brutal mauling that follows, with a screaming Glass flung about like a mouse being toyed with by a cat, is all shot in a single take—an Inarritu trademark that is viscerally effective each time it's used here—ends with him as little more than a bloodied rag doll.

Harry orders Fitzgerald and young trapper Jim Bridger (Will Poulter) to stay behind with Glass until he can send help. Given that Bridger is about as green as they come and Fitzgerald plainly means to abandon Glass, it seems an unconscionably bad decision by the commander. That is confirmed once Fitzgerald not only leaves Glass to the wintry wild, but also convinces a morally uncertain Bridger with a devil's logic that their charge was doomed, anyway.

Both those influences push the film towards catharsis, whether by inner revelation or violent action. Fitting its title, *The Revenant* is powered along by a lengthy series of resurrections, wherein Glass hauls his devastated body out of one womb- or grave-like space after another, his every sinew taut and determined. Glass keeps striking out across the blindingly gorgeous snowy landscape, a nearly voiceless presence wrapped in fur and scar tissue. It's the kind of thing that can pass for sheer spectacle or thinly sourced spirituality. In either case, the quasi-religious cast to many of Glass's scenes can feel beside the point, given that Glass is only bothering to stay alive in order to exact revenge.

Glass is not the only figure here who's chasing ghosts. A dramatically moribund subplot following Bridger and Fitzgerald finds each man trapped in different ways by the guilt over what they've done. After so much time with the mostly mute Glass, the film feels energized when it returns to the wandering Indians who slaughtered so many of Glass's comrades.

Led by their quite possibly insane chief Elk Dog (Duane Howard), they search obsessively for the daughter stolen from him by French traders. It's a fittingly tragic image, given that in real life the Arikara Indians (called "Ree" by the film's trappers) were at this point in history just a few years away from being decimated by disease and the white man.

Apocalyptic filigree and bravura filmmaking aside, *The Revenant* keeps coming back to an old, bloody story: good man chases bad man for doing bad things to good man. At some point, forgiveness would be more interesting.

This will be as big as **MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ROUGE NATION, JURASSIC WORLD, THE MARTIAN, TED 2** and **TRAINWRECK**.



4/26 1 KRAMPUS \$44 MILL BO
2919 SCREENS PG-13 98 MINUTES

Adam Scott (BLACK MASS, HOT TUB TIME MACHINE 2, SLEEPING WITH OTHER PEOPLE)

Toni Collette (MISS YOU ALREADY, THE BOXTROLLS, TAMMY, ENOUGH SAID)

There's a stop-motion interlude about 30 minutes into *Krampus* that constitutes the film's only inspired touch, and only then for being so out of the blue. In it, Krista Stadler's Omi relates the story of how, as a girl, her discontent with the Christmas season led to the summoning of the Krampus, a devil-like menace who, according to at least this film's interpretation of the folktale, tears through streets and invades homes with his wee little minions in tow, searching for children to punish for their ostensible transgressions. The artisanal level of craftsmanship that went into this sequence impresses in the moment, even as one is disappointed with how St. Nick's evil counterpart, so eerily arising from the realm of suggestion, is stripped of his connections with religious belief and of his role as a purveyor of moral judgment.

The film's opening scene, of shoppers tearing through a store in slow motion as they try to get their grubby hands on seasonal deals, is initially promising for suggesting that the Krampus's obligatory rampage will avenge rather than enforce the oppressive consumerism of the holidays. But as the shoppers continue to plow into one another, punching each other out while trampling store employees, it becomes clear that the scene exists only as a prelude to further mockeries to come. The ugliness of the shoppers is subsequently and contemptuously echoed in the rotund bodies and crass demeanors of the family members who tear into the home of Sarah (Toni Collette) and her husband, Tom (Adam Scott). Embarrassed at the dinner table by his tom-boyish cousins for his Christmas wishes, young Max (Emjay Anthony) tears up his letter to Santa and in so doing invites Krampus's wrath.

At the center of the film is a conservative lesson that asks us to abide by society's capitalistic impulses.

Krampus suggests what it might be like to see a shrill and anonymously shot Christmas movie starring Hugh Grant or Sarah Jessica Parker invaded by the ghoulies from Stuart Gordon's [Dolls](#). That's not an uninteresting proposition, except there's a sense throughout that the filmmakers forgot to color in their premise. The Krampus's arrival is signaled by an El Niño-like shock of bad weather, which causes the lights to go out across town. Everyone has strangely vanished except for the family at the center of the story, and after Max's sister, Beth (Stefania LaVie Owen), disappears after going to seek out her boyfriend, the rest of her clan begin to fall like dominos. In one scene, cousin Howie (Maverick Flack) is literally fished out of the house through the chimney after biting on a gingerbread-man minion dangling from one of Krampus's chains. The boy's indiscretion? Having a sweet tooth.

This one will rent as well as **HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2, ANT-MAN, PIXELS, PAUL BLART 2**, and **MAX**.





4/26 1 RIDE ALONG 2 COMEDY

\$85 MILL BO 3192 SCREENS PG-13 102 MINUTES

Kevin Hart (GET HARD, THE WEDDING RINGER, THINK LIKE A MAN TOO, ABOUT LAST NIGHT)

Ice Cube (22 JUMP STREET, XXX: STATE OF THE UNION, BARBERSHOP 2, ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS)

Tim Story's *Ride Along 2* feeds directly into my working theory that junk movies take all their chances in the first reels before settling into the tranquilizing monotony of mediocrity on the tail end. But the longer the buddy-cop antics of soon-to-be brothers-in-law Ben Barber (Kevin Hart) and James Payton (Ice Cube) trudge mirthfully forth, the more streamlined and normalized the movie gets. Honest bad movies at least hold the possibility of carrying viewers along when they're caught up in disbelief by what they're witnessing. *Ride Along 2*, which sows its wild oats and then settle for unexceptional cinematic domestication, are content to aim for total neutrality.

Hart and Cube are, respectively, messily enthusiastic and stripped entirely of anything approaching charisma. The formula calls for yin to run circles around yang, but that only works when both players are equally committed to the scenario. Cube looks embarrassed to be caught cashing his check here, while Hart conspicuously makes it rain. As our continuing saga of mad cop/manic cop picks up, Ben is now a real-deal cop, working tangentially alongside James even though the Atlanta P.D. clearly sees him as a charity case, to be patted on the head and sent pushing pencils at the earliest opportunity. When James stumbles on a flash drive indicating that the latest pusher he's apprehended might be attached to something far larger in scope going down in Miami, his sister, who's improbably engaged to Ben, begs James to take his future brother-in-law with him to crack the case, but be back by the end of the week for the wedding. Because that's how quickly and safely multi-billion-dollar crime rings are typically brought down.

Ride Along 2's frontloaded structure provides exactly one reflexively enjoyable action sequence. As Ben and James wind up pursued by assertive hitmen in a Miami Beach car chase, Ben draws on his extensive reserve of Xbox reflexes, visualizing their entire dash as a mission sequence from a *Grand Theft Auto*-style game, up to and including James in the next seat over, depicted a few too many steps below Uncanny Valley. But as the pair, working in tandem with attractive and conveniently single Miami homicide detective Maya Cruz (Olivia Munn), get closer and closer to their mark, the movie seems to deliberately scale back its own stake in the action. Like any serving of junk food, *Ride Along 2* seems engineered to give you that initial rush of satisfaction, but leaves you in a dead zone where the only thing you want is more of the same.



This will rent as well as **GET HARD, HORRIBLE BOSSES 2, UNFINISHED BUSINESS, TED 2, BURNT, and VACATION.**