

Horrible Bosses: It's true, most Americans hate those they work for

David Walsh
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Directed by Seth Gordon, screenplay by Michael Markowitz, John Francis Daley and Jonathan M. Goldstein

In *Horrible Bosses*, a black comedy, three unhappy individuals in Los Angeles plot to rid themselves of their employers, with complicated and unexpected consequences.

Nick Hendricks (Jason Bateman) works at some kind of financial outfit. His hopes of a promotion have been encouraged for months by his dreadful, slave-driving boss, Dave Harken (Kevin Spacey). However, when it comes to the moment of truth, Nick realizes Harken has simply tricked him into working like a dog and that the future only holds out more of the same.

Hendricks's friend Dale Arbus (Charlie Day), a dental assistant, finds himself under the thumb of a dentist, Julia (Jennifer Aniston), who sexually harasses him in the office with a vengeance. She threatens to destroy his relationship and plans for marriage if he will not do her bidding.

The third member of the trio, Kurt Buckman (Jason Sudeikis), is happy with his job at a chemical company until his benevolent employer (Donald Sutherland) dies and the latter's greedy, drug-addicted, unstable son, Bobby (Colin Farrell), takes over. Everything then goes to hell at the firm.

After various hesitations and some heated debate, the three men draw practical conclusions from the fact they would be better off if their bosses were no longer alive. They go in search of professional help, with distinctly mixed results. Eventually, a glowering ex-con (Jamie Foxx) suggests they stage a series of accidents and do away with each other's employers, à la Alfred

Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, to confuse the police.

A series of misadventures ensues. "Reconnaissance missions" turn into break-ins. The trio leave a myriad of clues behind them, including a carpet full of cocaine. Dale saves the life of Harken, the man he is supposed to put out of Nick's misery. Kurt ends up in Julia's bed. Nick witnesses Bobby's killing and finds himself accused of a murder he planned to carry out, but had nothing to do with. In fact, the three friends have discovered they are incapable of carrying out their grisly plan.

Needless to say, everything unravels in a manner favorable to our heroes.

Horrible Bosses is amusing about one quarter of the time. There *are* some genuinely funny sequences. Bateman is one of the more remarkable talents in Hollywood (and not only in comedy; i.e., *Arrested Development*; his part in *State of Play* [2009] was the most convincing element in that film). Charlie Day (best known for the television series, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*) is also gifted. Some of their antics, including presumably a number of improvised moments, work well. Although, in my opinion, the single best line in the film belongs to Jamie Foxx, who delivers it impeccably.

Moreover, somewhere in the making of the film and in the considerable popular response to it, one can hazily—and sometimes only dimly—locate a social fact of life: that Americans generally have odious bosses and generally despise them. Everybody knows this, although no one dares say it in the corporate media, owned and managed precisely by such despicable figures. But when a movie shows up with a title like this, there is considerable instinctive interest, at least triggered by everyday realities and widespread

sentiment.

Nor has this interest been evoked entirely accidentally. Connections between their movie project and present-day life apparently entered into the thinking of those who made *Horrible Bosses*. In an interview with *indieWire*, for example, director Seth Gordon explained, “I think the reason the movie works is because it taps into a very real feeling. At least amongst my friends...we all sort of bought in some way into the American dream, that if you can work hard and focus and keep your nose to the grindstone then things will work out and then honestly, the rug got yanked out and a lot of the job security and the upward mobility and however you want to identify the American dream, is just not true. And I do think that’s what underpins the story and that’s why honestly the movie works. Although most people watching it probably won’t go there and don’t need to because I think it’s just a sign of the times, or it’s part of the times.”

The difficulty is that the film weakly and only intermittently makes the connection to those “times.” For the most part, the humor in *Horrible Bosses* comes from the interplay and foolishness of the three principals. It is largely external to the social situation theoretically at the film’s center. Spacey and Farrell, both capable of sharp characterization and biting humor, play one-dimensional figures who act absurdly and monstrosly throughout. Their parts are done without nuance and texture, and without much humor. It’s a serious waste. Jennifer Aniston’s role is simply undignified and tasteless, and not at all believable. Donald Sutherland is given next to nothing to do. The storyline, in general, is poorly constructed and unconvincing (for example, would a hardnosed, ruthless businessman be likely to have no security system in his mansion?). The writers and director have been far too easy on themselves.

Horrible Bosses is not a *social comedy*, despite its nominal theme and perhaps despite the intentions (in small or large measure) of its creators. Hollywood filmmakers, among other things, are simply out of practice at this. It is difficult for writers and directors today, with the best of intentions, and there is no need to assume those in this case, to produce works in a genre, socially inspired satire, that has not been worked at systematically and successfully in America since the 1960s (Billy Wilder, Stanley Kubrick in *Dr.*

Strangelove, Blake Edwards, George Cukor, Frank Tashlin, George Axelrod, etc.).

Instead, unhappily, in the wake of the commercial success of innumerable Judd Apatow-associated films and *The Hangover*, the makers of *Horrible Bosses* resort to the lowest common denominator far too much of the time: over-the-top, “extreme” behavior, toilet humor, stupid and vulgar sex talk, all designed to appeal to a certain demographic. This is done in the name of giving the public, especially its youthful component, “what it wants,” as though the public had the slightest choice in the matter.



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