

'Bad' is Good: Jason Bateman Delivers a Solid Directorial Debut

March 25, 2014

1:03 PM MST

Chances are that if you were asked to come up with a word for “the action or habit of estimating something as worthless,” you would not pluck floccinaucinihilipilificate from the nether regions of your mind.



Focus Features


Until [now](#). (You're welcome, now have at it.)

But there it is on screen in [Bad Words](#)—11 syllables that not only spark a chuckle but a serious “you’ve gotta be kidding me.” It’s just one small thing (well ...) that peppers breakthrough screenwriter Andrew Dodge’s politically incorrect and brazen script about a brooding 40-year-old who finds a loophole in a national spelling bee competition and runs with it with reckless, if not shameless, abandon.

[Jason Bateman](#) (*Horrible Bosses*, *Identity Theft*, *Arrested Development*) plays that 40-year-old. His Guy Trilby is as irreverent as they come. The loophole that he uses as fuel—that he never graduated the eighth grade and spelling bee competitions mark that as a cut off—allows him to enter the fold of regional bee competitions, much to the chagrin of coordinators, participants and their parents. But what can they do? Trilby, a guy who takes pride in his photographic memory, boasts sharp wit and is capable of delivering rebuttals with sardonic dismissiveness. Clearly, they are no match for the man. Onward he goes until he lands in the preeminent “National Quill Spelling Bee” with an inquisitive reporter Jenny (Kathryn Hahn) at his side, hoping to pen one whopper of a story.

Trilby’s motivations are never quite clear to begin with, but part of the fun and inventiveness of Dodge’s script, is how well he drops hints (some big, some small) that Trilby isn’t just doing what he does for sport. Something unsettling lurks deep within the man’s psyche and he seems to be on a mission to see something through to the bitter end.

Along the way, he trades barbs (and more) with Jenny and finds himself hanging out with fellow bee participant Chaitanya Chopra (Rohan Chand)—such a bright blast of sunshine that it only rattles Trilby all the more. Still, there’s a connection between the two and it’s amusing to watch these scenes unfold. Chand is a delight to watch and perfectly on beat. There are foes however: spelling bee officials Dr. Deagan (Allison Janney) and Dr. Bowman (Philip Baker Hall) hope to thwart Trilby’s progress. But the script needed a bright character like Chopra so that Dodge could keep us invested and pull us like a thread through the small eye of the needle that becomes the film’s final act.

Bateman seems to have maneuvered well in this latest phase of his career. He had garnered fans after TV’s [Arrested Development](#) but it wasn’t until 2011’s *Horrible Bosses* that his film outings were given some major CPR. A master of sarcasm and dry wit, he’s in fine form here. As director, he’s fortunate to not have had to deal with an overload of scenes or settings. There’s a sparse, just-the-basics feel to the movie, which, in some ways mirrors Trilby’s no-nonsense, one- that Bateman’s early days were on TV’s *Little House on the Prairie* (he says his version of high school was on the set watching series’ star Michael Landon direct several episodes.) He also wonderfully maneuvers Dodge’s script and much like the unfolding of the films *Bad Santa* and *Bad Teacher*, we get a good kind of *Bad* here—offbeat and a kick in the pants.

Meanwhile, spelling bees (surprisingly) have done well. *Spellbound* (2002) and *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) kept audiences invested and so, too, will [Bad Words](#).

Which brings us back to floccinaucinihilipilificate. (And your homework until screening time.)

From the Latin root “of little or no value,” it’s best to tread carefully before tackling its pronunciation—either that,

or take a shot of tequila. There's flocci, nauci, nihili, and pili (think: Seven Dwarves or *The Hobbit*) and add a "cate" or "cation" to the end. The earliest recording of the word apparently was in a letter penned in 1741 by English poet William Shenston: "I loved him for nothing so much as his flocci-nauci-nihili-pili-fication of money."

Or, we can just say that we would never really floccinaucinihilipilificate Bad Words. No. Not at all.

Bad Words

***** (out of four)**

With Jason Bateman, Kathryn Hahn, Allison Janney, Philip Baker Hall and Rohan Chand. Written by Andrew Dodge. Directed by Jason Bateman. A [Focus Features](#) release. Rated: R 88 minutes.



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