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'Other Guys' a frustrating movie with a lot of laughs

Will Ferrell and company deliver a good hour of laughs

August 05, 2010 | By Michael Phillips | Movie critic

2 1/2 stars

A frustrating movie, albeit one with a lot of laughs, "The Other Guys" stars Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg as New York Police Department desk jockeys who get a chance to transform themselves into high-risk, maximum-destruction superstars, chasing down a Bernie Madoff-type scam artist and destroying half their city in the process.

For a good hour, this is the picture Kevin Smith was trying to make with "Cop Out." It's satisfying to see Ferrell take on a more officious, buttoned-down character (though with a checkered past); that way, an actor has somewhere to go with his craziness, as opposed to sustaining a boor's boor, as Ferrell did in "Talladega Nights" and his best comedy to date, "Anchorman." And Wahlberg's comic instincts, his slow- and quick-burning exasperation, may not carry the subtlety of his superb supporting turn in "The Departed," but they more than meet the demands of this project.

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So why does it frustrate? Because Adam McKay and co-writer Chris Henchy ("Land of the Lost") have overloaded the narrative, stretching it 20 minutes beyond its practical use and mistaking bigger and more explosive with funnier. From "Freebie and the Bean" to "Running Scared" to the "Lethal Weapon" franchise, the challenge with cop-centric action comedies has remained essentially the same: How to balance straightforward adrenaline-rush material with bits you'd never find in a real cop film?

This one begins buckling under its own weight around the midpoint; on the other hand, I'm already looking forward to catching certain asides and riffs again on cable. Early on, Wahlberg's Detective Hoitz regales Ferrell's Detective Gamble with an insult about a lion swimming out to sea to kill some tuna, and Ferrell's response — a sustained act of literary criticism and literal-minded wind-baggery that grows weirder as it goes — reminds you how amusing this guy really is. Another gag involves a brawl, conducted almost entirely in whispers, that breaks out at a police funeral. Lovely idea; strong execution. "Is this how you conduct yourself? In a *democracy*?" Ferrell sputters in another scene. Already we're talking about more laughs than a lot of Ferrell's previous vehicles.

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