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1 The word is out: the Coen brothers showed far less scruples than their criminal characters ever did at the idea of killing off such a charming, cookie-baking old lady of a film. But what is it exactly they have done to crush out the genuine sense of good-natured fun the goofily scary characters of the original Ladykillers gave out when faced with stronger than they could match? Some have lauded Tom Hanks’ performance, fewer have suggested a certain long windedness to his Mark Twain flavored, Poe-ish grimace-punctuated speeches, where one becomes less fascinated by what is being said than by Tom Hanks’ delivery of uniquely formulated lines.

2 Talent must be confessed as the Coen brothers prove once again that they know a thing or two about casting, directing, lighting, costume, setting and more. But the reason Tom Hanks is only mildly funny and Alec Guinness is a riot is that the latter was a character, not a stereotype. Tom Hanks is a Southern gentleman with a love for quiet evenings by the fireplace, but when pushed to reveal his true nature, he’s nothing more than a condescending calculator with little spine. The Coen brothers take from the original and freely add on. Everything becomes larger than life, starting with Mr. Munson, old Marva’s belated husband, appropriately changing expressions in what seems like at least a 4 by 6 foot frame when Mrs. Wilberforce’s deceased husband, standing at attention, looked to be inhabiting a mere 4 by 6 inch frame. In similar fashion, the less than bright strong man becomes an absolutely moronic college football player, the hardened criminal is now a stoned-face Asian master of the short verb, the handy man gets his finger blown off instead of bitten by a parrot, and to get to the essentials, the one streak of stereotypes no one failed to notice, Major Courtney, who simply could not kill an old lady that reminded him of his mother, is catapulted into the 21st century in the elastic body of Marlon Wayans.

3 The youngest of the Wayans family performs another of his classic ethnic roles Irma P. Hall classically slaps him for. Marva Munson indeed claims to know many young black men who unlike Gawain McSam, possess the ability to restrain from using foul language,
at least in her presence. She herself falls into the category of the good old nurturing black Ma, has no qualms about keeping the money as she plans to buy, among other things, a dozen new umbrellas. Apart from confirming Marva’s full adherence to a school that « stands without apology for the old-time religion and the absolute authority of the Bible » (BJU website), her choice is awry given that Bob Jones University is known to most solely for its ban on interracial dating, revoked in 2000 after much media coverage. Bob Jones was integrated as late as 1975 and still counts very few non-white students. Marva Munson, while herself welcoming of all god-worshippers regardless of race or religion, seems entirely oblivious of these well-known facts. The religious theme in Ladykillers, making for great Gospel music that incidentally returned more profits than the film itself, is a downright caricature.

4 The age-old counter-argument to pinpointing the racially biased discourse of such a light-hearted comedy is that everybody in the film is a stereotype, whether white, black, or Asian... True enough. The remake even comprises an added-on female accomplice to include sexist jokes to an otherwise incomplete picture. Stereotyping is admittedly simply another form of extending the original material, stretching out every element to make up a far more loony comedy.

5 However, not only do critics of all persuasions agree that it is precisely the extensive stereotyping that weakens the movie, but stereotyping has quite different consequences on the various communities therein represented. Will football players truly suffer from being portrayed as dimwitted muscle brains with a good heart? Or more likely, good-heartedly laugh at the idea? Will mountaineers of German descent feel betrayed by this depiction of a double-crossing, compensation-seeking, dog-killing, bowel-challenged film-prop technician couple living in the nostalgia of the 60s Freedom-Riders days? Or does anybody really think such people do exist? Old Gospel-singing, overweight black ladies and mean-looking Chinese corner-store owners, however, constitute more of an existing societal stereotype and like the rather prone-to-sleeping-on-duty black Sheriff, are unlikely to help curb the gentle everyday racial tension most people unwittingly contribute to. As for Marlon’s character, who is right smart yet incapable of keeping a $5-an-hour job the heist depends on, who delivers more than one piece of political repartee yet « doesn’t vote and doesn’t give a fuck », he looks every bit like the two store robbers who serve to introduce the General as he disarms them with the classic finger-up-your-nose kung-fu move, and who have no purpose whatsoever being black urban hoodlums, when they could just as well have been urban hoodlums of a less conspicuous kind.

6 The 2004 remake of The Ladykillers is a prime example of how stereotypes can relentlessly feed on each other, seeking jokes that’ll make you laugh, until you come to realize that whatever walk-of-life you strid, the joke is on you.

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