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Movie Review

'Harold and Kumar' full of laughs, social undercurrents

HAROLD AND KUMAR GO TO WHITE CASTLE
*** out of *****

BY D.E. MCGUIRT
THE GAMECOCK

Since there isn't a White Castle within a 1,000-mile radius of our fair city of Columbia, it might be worthwhile to first explain that White Castle is a 24-hour fast-food joint that serves miniature hamburgers real cheap (by the way, one wonders if White Castle corporate headquarters picked up some of the tab for the film's budget). It sounds simple enough, but in director Danny Leiner's new film "Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle," this fast-food joint is oh-so-much more than that.

For Harold Lee and Kumar Patel, White Castle represents all that is good in life. They come to this revelation while watching TV after an evening of drug use. A commercial featuring a sultry-voiced temptress extolling the

virtues of White Castle's value meal rings the Pavlov bell, and next thing you know, they're in the car and on their way. Odysseus had his Penelope, Don Quixote had his Dulcinea, George W. has his Iraqi oil, and Harold and Kumar have White Castle hamburgers.

And yes, the stars of this stoner movie are Asian. This fact, besides breathing life into the conventional American tokier flick, serves as the driving force behind the movie's plot. Both characters spend the length of the film struggling with the stereotypes associated with their ethnicities.

Straight man Harold (played by John Cho), a Korean junior investment banker, has to put up with a couple of ex-fratboy coworkers who like to dump their busy work on the "hardworking Asian guy." Freewheeling Kumar (played by Kal Penn), drifting between college and med school, has to deal with the lofty expectations of a close-knit Indian family full

of physicians. And then there are the extreme sports dudes, belligerent cops, boil-covered fundamentalists and gassy, buxom British twins who keep showing up as foils. Our heroes have quite a night ahead of them.

As a comedy in the Cheech-and-Chong strain, "Harold" has some decent laughs. Screenwriters Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg subscribe to the belief that if you throw enough jokes at an audience, some of them will stick. And just enough of them do to keep one relatively happy.

As you'd probably expect for a movie from the director of "Dude, Where's My Car?" it's pure id. Flatulence, boobies and jokes about pubes show up on cue to satisfy the target audience. An Asian student organization at Princeton puts on a hell of a dorm party. Neil Patrick Harris of "Doogie Howser, MD," happy to be cashing a paycheck again, makes a bizarre and hilarious cameo as some sort of sex-crazed, car-seat-humping prophet wandering the New Jersey wilderness. This alone will probably make it worth the price of matinee admission for some.

But there is a subtext at work in the film. Any cinema geek worth his film-society membership card will tell you that White Castle represents assimilation into mainstream America for these second-generation immigrants. In a healthy dose of fair turnaround, the film reduces each and every WASP character to the one-dimensional status usually set aside for Asians and Latinos in Hollywood films. It unfortunately crosses the line into sanctimoniousness for a few minutes when Harold is arrested and put in a cell with a falsely accused black man. But don't lose patience, male-teenager target audience: A psychedelic cheetah ride, extreme hang-gliding and some majestic little burgers soon follow.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Kal Penn, left, and John Cho star in "Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle," a comedy in the tradition of Cheech and Chong.

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