

Beyoncé and Cuba lose the fight against suck

The Fighting Temptations

Directed by Jonathan Lynn

Featuring Cuba Gooding Jr and Beyoncé Knowles

Paramount Pictures

<http://www.fightingtemptations.com/>

Opens Friday, 19 September

JHENIFER PABILLANO

Arts & Entertainment Writer

The *Fighting Temptations* is supposed to be one of those heartwarming triumph-of-the-spirit films like *Varsity Blues* or the inimitable *Ladybugs*, where a ragtag bunch of nobodies (this time in the form of a choir) beats the odds by somehow pulling off a big win (this time, it's a major gospel competition). Lots of quirky characters are involved (this one has Rue McClanahan and R&B singer Montell Jordan on the payroll), and there's someone possessing ludicrous talent that will most certainly knock out the opposition (Beyoncé Knowles, songstress of *Destiny's Child*). And, as always, there is a charismatic leader at the helm to guide these people to their glory—in this case Cuba Gooding Jr.

So far, so good, right? Wrong. Oh, so horribly wrong.

Somehow, director Jonathan Lynn put all the elements together in such a way that none of it works. It doesn't help that he's got Cuba Gooding Jr, who obviously phones in this terrible performance to pay the bills, and that the film seems to have been edited into a choppy mess by that guy with the short-term memory problem from *Memento*. The net result is an excruciatingly painful viewing experience rivaled only by the experience of pouring hot bleach directly into your eyeballs.

Cuba plays Darrin Hill, a New York City ad executive who comes back to small-town

Montecarlo, Georgia, for his aunt's funeral. In her will, she tells Darrin to lead the church choir to win a gospel championship in six weeks' time. If he does it, he'll get a small inheritance. That's crucial, as Darrin's been recently fired and owes thousands in credit card bills.

So Darrin takes over the awful, tiny choir, whose membership includes the vengeant sister of the church pastor, who ran Darrin's family out of town years ago after discovering his mother was singing in a nightclub. Despite her objections, Darrin hooks in Lilly (Knowles), another cabaret singer, who turns in a surprisingly pleasant performance as the choir's soloist. And this is when the movie begins to go haywire.

For a much better version of a choir making good, catch *Sister Act I or II*—like Cuba, Whoopi's got a supporting Oscar too, and the second film's even got Lauryn Hill, who could destroy Beyoncé just by thinking about it.

Instead of going to the proper next step—namely, showing the group growing to trust each other, ironing out the quirkiness, or what we would call character development—the film inexplicably cuts to a title card reading “Three Weeks Later.” And wham: when we cut back to the movie, the terrible choir has suddenly turned into God's heavenly cherubim.

But even after this jaw-droppingly insane narrative leap of logic, things manage to roll steadily downhill. A brief set of scenes display a

stilted romance between Lilly and Darrin, and in a mostly unexplained move, three convicts show up from the local prison to be part of the choir.

Darrin then suddenly gets rehired by his ad agency in a rather disturbing subplot—he's to be the driving force behind selling malt liquor to poor black people—and with real enthusiasm, he ditches the choir for New York, until he has a strange *deus ex machina* revelation in the midst of a malt liquor ad pitch.

Of course, he flies back, rejoins the choir for its big win, and asks Beyoncé to marry him. Another title card announces “Eighteen Months Later,” and a baby shows up. The scenes are flashed to show that all the key elements are there, but none of them are ever connected in a meaningful manner that would make any moviegoer care.

As for the musical scenes, they're filmed and sung well, but the astonishing crap going on within the narrative makes them disjointed distractions more than anything else.

If your money's worth anything to you, never see this film, on video, the cheap theatres, or on a plane. For a much better version of a choir-making-good, catch *Sister Act I or II*—like Cuba, Whoopi's got a supporting Oscar too, and the second film's even got Lauryn Hill, who could destroy Beyoncé simply by thinking about it.

