

Franco Shows His Chops

From Florida drug pusher to the Wizard of Oz, James Franco puts on a hell of a show

By Peter Travers

Spring Breakers

James Franco

Directed by Harmony Korine

★★½

IF YOU WANT TO STOP HATING on James Franco for his 2011 Oscar-hosting debacle, the time is now. *Spring Breakers*, beach-party fluff done as an art film by the reliably bizarre Harmony Korine, is a return to form for Franco. As Alien, a gun-crazy Florida drug dealer with tats, beaded cornrows and a grill any rapper would envy, Franco is a bug-fuck blast.

Too bad the movie itself is rarely as outrageous as he is. The promise of nudity and girl-on-girl action among Disney hotties Vanessa Hudgens (*High School Musical*), Selena Gomez (*Wizards of Waverly Place*) and Ashley Benson (*Pretty Little Liars*) is just a porny tease. Candy (Hudgens), Brit (Benson), Faith (Gomez) and Cotty (Rachel Korine, the director's wife) are merely college BFFs yearning for a spring break. Everyone but Faith (she's into Christian studies) agrees to rob a local chicken shack to finance a Tampa getaway. Here's your chance to hear the chirpy Hudgens say, "Give me your motherfucking money or I'm going to shoot your fucking brains out." And they're off.

Alien laps them right up. At his crib, where bong and blow are plentiful and Al Pacino's *Scarface* plays on a continuous loop, the coeds live the dream. Violence looms in the form of Archie (Gucci Mane), Alien's gangsta enemy. No sweat. When Alien isn't going down on a gun barrel in a homoerotic domination game, he sits at his



James Franco does it gangsta-style in the R-rated *Spring Breakers* (top). In the kid-friendly *Oz the Great and Powerful*, Franco plays a wizard who wouldn't hurt a fly or a china doll.



Oz the Great and Powerful

James Franco

Directed by Sam Raimi

★★

QUICK: WHO PLAYED THE title role in 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*? The answer is Frank Morgan, who stepped in when W.C. Fields couldn't make a deal. I bring this up because James Franco, who plays a younger version of the wizard in the overscaled, underwhelming prequel, *Oz the Great and Powerful*, is also standing in a shadow. Robert Downey Jr. was the original choice. Would Downey have been a better pick for the charismatic con artist than the more introspective Franco? You be the judge.

My feeling is that Franco does just fine – against daunting odds. *The Wizard of Oz* is a certified classic, a generation-spanning favorite. Mess with it at your peril. And Franco's *Oz*

poolside piano and croons Britney Spears ballads to the girls, who wear pink ski masks and dance around waving AK-47s.

Faith is the first one to take the bus home. You may want to follow, before the exasperating Korine of *Gummo*, *Julien Donkey-Boy* and *Trash Humpers* starts letting dialogue repeat itself across a throbbing soundscape from Cliff Martinez (*Drive*) and Skrillex. If the reverb doesn't get you, the images will, especially a bloody,

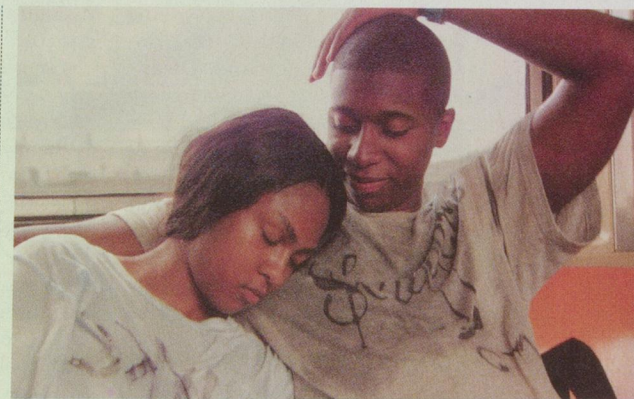
climactic gun battle. Benoit Debrie, the camera master who shot *Irreversible*, washes the screen with lurid color that turns your eyes into pinwheels.

The actors can't compete with the kinky, trippy visuals – except Franco, who surfs Korine's wavelength and doesn't wipe out. No small feat, given Korine's masturbatory self-regard. Franco's sleazoid tour de force is no match for *127 Hours* or even *Pineapple Express*. But this dude can hold the screen.

vehicle, pimped out in 3D and every computer trick in New Hollywood's digital playbook, is a mess indeed. There's no Judy Garland songs, no Scarecrow, no Tin Man, no Cowardly Lion. There's also no simplicity, no magic, no truth.

Amazingly, it starts out like a winner. The mesmerizing prologue, shot in black-and-white and presented on a boxy screen, evokes the Kansas prairie of the first film. But instead of Dorothy on the farm singing "Over the Rainbow," we get circus magician Oscar Diggs (Franco) fooling audiences with cheap tricks and fleeing jealous husbands whose wives he's tricked into his bed. Director Sam Raimi, of the *Spider-Man* trilogy, works visual wonders as he eases into the story. As does Franco, who shows us a man of his time (1905), a charlatan secretly obsessed with true-life wizards Harry Houdini and Thomas Edison. It's only when a tornado sweeps Oscar, in a hot-air balloon, into the Emerald City that the film blooms into a candy-colored widescreen extravaganza that leaves character at the mercy of fancy FX.

Franco is basically playing the Dorothy role, a stranger in a strange land. Rachel Weisz, Mila Kunis and a luminous Michelle Williams portray the witches he meets along the way as he pretends to be the wizard the citizens of Oz crave. It's cute overload as he befriends a miniature china doll (voiced by Joey King) and a flying monkey (Zach Braff). In mining the novel by L. Frank Baum for fresh material, screenwriters Mitchell Kapner (*The Whole Nine Yards*) and David Lindsay-Abaire (*Rabbit Hole*) miss the essential elements of charm and subversive wit. Instead, this 3D exhibition of a movie takes its cue from Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* and keeps throwing things at us, relentlessly, from the bared fangs of airborne baboons to a witch on a broomstick. Audiences may lap it up (the *Oz*-themed stage musical *Wicked* is a global smash). Near the end, as limitless technology teaches the wizard about his own human limitations, Franco hits grace notes that let us see glimmers of how great and powerful this uneven *Oz* might have been.



DESPERATE MEASURES Tashiana Washington and Ty Hickson plan a killer graffiti-writing mission in *Gimme the Loot* (top). Steve Carell plays a magician in hot-box distress in *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone*.

The Incredible Burt Wonderstone

Steve Carell, Jim Carrey

Directed by Don Scardino

★★½

IT SOUNDS LIKE FUN. STEVE Carell and Steve Buscemi as cheese-whizzy Vegas magicians trying to fight off Jim Carrey and his new kind of wizard act, a *Jackass*-like exercise in self-abuse that's an online sensation. Cool, right? Not right. Magicians have been pulling rabbits out of hats for ages. And yet, with all this talent, no one can make a decent script materialize. What screenwriters Jonathan Goldstein and John Francis Daley (*Horrible Bosses*) have foisted on the cast, including the great Alan Arkin as a retired magician, shouldn't happen to anyone, especially an audience.

Carell's Burt Wonderstone is an epic ass-wipe who mistreats his partner, Anton Marvelton

(Buscemi). They were friends as kids; magic was their escape from being bullied. But success – casino mogul Doug Munny (a slumming James Gandolfini) pays them millions – has tainted the wonder. When hubris breaks up the act, Burt must rediscover his inner child. Corny? Much worse.

Enter Steve Gray (Carrey), a street performer who revels in the gross-out – driving a drill into his own skull, letting a crowd beat him with sticks like a human piñata. Are you laughing yet? Carrey seems to be in an entirely different movie. And his is no better.

Director Don Scardino (*30 Rock*) has no idea how to blend the sweet and the sleazy. So he keeps trotting out more tricks. You can smell the desperation. Near the end, Burt and Anton attempt to make an audience disappear. *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone* should have no trouble with that one.

Gimme the Loot

Tashiana Washington, Ty Hickson

Directed by Adam Leon

★★★½

WANT A BRACING ALTERNATIVE to the usual Hollywood swill? Try *Gimme the Loot*, a fresh, funky jolt of filmmaking joy. Made for peanuts on the streets of New York in less than a month, this exhilarating gift of a movie marks a stellar debut for writer-director Adam Leon, 31. Instead of the easy attitudinizing that is the default position for teen comedies, *Gimme the Loot* fills each frame with raw talent and exuberance.

Plot? It's two hard days' nights in the lives of Malcolm (Ty Hickson) and Sofia (Tashiana Washington), teen graffiti artists on a mission. Back in the 1980s, burgeoning Banksys used to bomb the apple, meaning paint their tags on the giant apple that rose up at Shea Stadium whenever the Mets hit a homer. No one's pulled it off since. So Malcolm and Sofia are fired up to do it. Trouble is they need \$500 to bribe a guard for access at Citi Field, the Mets' home since 2009. Like most indie filmmakers, including Leon, these outlaws will do anything to get the loot and get themselves in business.

That's the movie, a chain of scenes about two kids, paint cans in hand, eager to show their artistic cred. Never mind cops or gangs or a rival crew of Queens graffiti writers out for blood. Plenty of films wallow in spirit-killing. Leon celebrates defiance of all that. What's a few setbacks when you're having the time of your life?

The amateur status of Hickson and Washington only makes them seem more real, more compelling. They're stars in the making. Malcolm wants sex from Ginnie (a terrific Zoe Liscage), the rich white girl buying his weed. Their scenes uncloak layers of class and race resentments. Likewise, the sublime Washington uncovers the chinks in Sofia's bravado, but still paints her as she is, an unstoppable force. Leon never oversells his movie. He reveals the bond between Malcolm and Sofia in the space between their words. That's the mark of a true filmmaker. Gimme more.