

SCREEN DAILY

Live!

3 May, 2007 | By David D'Arcy

Dir: Bill Guttentag. US. 2007. 96mins.

Bill Guttentag's hilarious satire of reality/game show media culture, *Live!* takes its subject to the wall with a live televised Russian Roulette competition. Presented as a *The Making Of* story, *Live!* also attacks the ghoulish opportunism of independent documentaries.

Live! will show viewers of *The Apprentice* that 'you're fired' can have a very literal meaning. The wildly funny film has topicality, a zinger script, and, with Eva Mendes, a sexy comic actress working in its favour. Mendes, along with the notoriety of exploitation television, should make *Live!* easy to market as a comedy. The film's smart media critique could also corner the talking-heads market.

Mendes rising career promises to give *Live!* a strong place on the video shelf. For foreign audiences, the comedy offers everything outrageous that many of them were ready to believe about the violent spectacle of American culture.

Live! is the story of Katy, Mendes, who is hired at American Broadcast Network (ABN) to shake things up and build ratings. The only thing that overshadows her wardrobe is her ambition and she can talk as well as she can dress. It isn't enough that she's rising in the ranks of shameless TV hucksters. She's made a deal with Rex (Krumholtz), an indie documentarian, to film her ascent. *Live!* is a film within a film.

Once Katy and her team brainstorm the idea of *Russian Roulette*, earnest contestants vie to be on the show, following the principle that every American thinks he'll win the lottery - or in this case, that he won't win. There's a model named Abalone, an aspiring small-town actress, an African-American writer who thinks the show will get him published, a surfer and a struggling farmer whose son has an incurable disease.

Mini-profiles filmed to introduce the contestants to the television audience are withering parodies of Pop Americana.

Mendes is glib and ballsy, and hard to take your eyes off as the exec who sells a suicide game show where the recurring line is 'The gun, please.' Her bearing is a bit like the comic Reese Witherspoon with a killer instinct, and a bit more like the iconic slash-and-burn corporate climber with a different outfit for every meeting.

If Mendes can continue at this level (and with scripts as good as Guttentag's), then she'll soon be opening movies.

As Rex, David Krumholtz plays an outsider character who seems to have a conscience, but gives in to the opportunity to film something never filmed before, even if it means standing by and watching someone die.

Also caving to the pressure of ratings and profits is the company's lawyer (Maugher), who defends broadcasting live suicides on First Amendment grounds.

With office comedies (and game shows) everywhere on television, this one stands out because of Guttentag's punchy and relentlessly wry script, much of it delivered by the supporting cast in corporate dead-pan. Guttentag seems to know that world well. He created and produced the NBC series *Crime And Punishment*. He also won Oscars for two documentaries: *Twin Towers* (2003) and *You Don't Have To Die* (1989).

Guttentag's ending fails to reach the level of humour, dramatic intensity and critique that the subject demands (and that the film has prepared you for), but by that time the audience is hooked, and may not even care.

Production designer Robert De Vico has the zen-design of the media office just right. His set design for the game show is as wild as the concept, configured like a spinning revolver, in which each contestant stands in his or her own personal chamber.

Costume designer Dayna Pink has a knack for choosing clothes that complement whichever gambit Mendes's character is pursuing. Live! will ensure her plenty of space in the glossies, even before it's in the cinemas.

Producers/backers
Mosaic Media Group

International sales
Fortissimo

Producers
Charles Roven
Alex Gartner
William Green

Executive producers
Eva Mendes
Randy Sosin
Alan Glazer
Dennis Gore

Screenplay
Bill Guttentag

Cinematography
Stephen Kazmierski

Production design
Robert De Vico

Editor
Jim Stewart

Music
Phil Marshall

Main cast
Eva Mendes
David Krumholtz
Andre Maugher
Rob Brown
Katie Cassidy
Jay Hernandez
Eric Lively
Monet Mazur
Jeffrey Dean Morgan
Missi Pyle

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