

Movie Review

Howard's comedy "Gung Ho" isn't funny

By **Matt Diedrich**
Reporter

With the back-to-back successes of "Splash" and "Cocoon" under his belt, director Ron Howard is starting to look like the next Steven Spielberg. Like Spielberg, he has received high praise for his ability to make hit movies that display a lot of heart.

Yet even Spielberg had his "1941," and now Howard continues the tradition with his new movie "Gung Ho," a lame comedy that simply isn't funny.

Michael Keaton stars as Hunt Stevenson, an auto worker who convinces a Japanese company to re-open the plant in his financially-ailing hometown. When the company sends a management team to teach the American workers the Japanese style of auto making, a predictable culture clash results.

The Japanese try to teach the Americans the value of working as a team, while the Americans try to teach the Japanese the va-

lue of the individual. It never really gets any more complicated than that, or any more interesting.

The viewer does find himself becoming more involved in the movie's second half, mainly because the filmmakers decide to

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throw in a little more plot. During this section of the film, Keaton arranges a contest of sorts. If the Americans can build 15,000 cars in one month (the Japanese record), they will receive a much-needed raise.

This sequence provides a few honest laughs and some emotional impact, but by then it's too late. Howard and company have already blown it.

Part of the fault lies in the script of Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel. It contains very little real insight into the problems of its characters, and its humor content is even slimmer.

Too many of the gags are easily predictable, based on Japanese stereotypes, or just not funny.

To make matters worse, the writers insist upon giving Keaton an endless string of "rous-

ing speeches" and, towards the end, upon getting him into a few too many fistfights.

Yet some of the blame has to go to Howard and the cast. Many of the jokes were probably funny as written, but fall flat on the screen due to ill-timed delivery. Howard needs to regain the sense of comic timing that he displayed so flawlessly in his earlier films.

Keaton could also use a change. His hyperkinetic wise guy bit may have worked wonders in "Night Shift" and "Mr. Mom," but in "Gung Ho" it's irritating. The fact that his char-

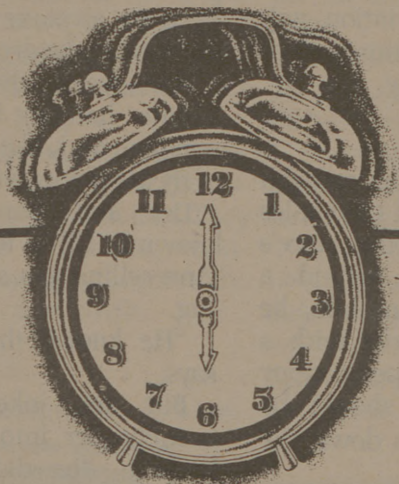
actor behaves like an idiot most of the time doesn't help matters either.

Gedde Watanabe, who appeared in "Sixteen Candles" and "Volunteers," achieves some success as the leader of the management team. His character is certainly more believable and more likable than Keaton's, and he frequently steals scenes from his co-star.

Mimi Rogers gives an unimpressive non-performance as Keaton's girlfriend, in a role which requires her to dump him when he's a jerk and take him back when he makes up for it.

Even George Wendt of "Cheers," normally an asset to any movie, has trouble as one of Keaton's worker-buddies. His character comes off as a bigoted creep who never really redeems himself.

"Gung Ho" even makes the unfortunate mistake of constantly reminding the viewer how bad it is. Whenever Keaton tries to crack a joke, for instance, the Japanese respond with blank, unamused stares. Unfortunately, the audience will likely react the same way.



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