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THE RULES OF THE GAME



Think of Michel Gondry, and the mind instantly locates him in a factory for the imagination, a place at once fantastic and naive, its objects summoned from a child's drawings of the adult world. If you'd been hanging around Soho this week, that's exactly where you would have found the French auteur of stop-motion Legos and giant, wicked hands: For today's release of "Be Kind Rewind," his fourth film, Gondry has transformed Deitch Projects' Wooster Street space into, yes, a factory for the imagination. Through March 22, the gallery will be playing host to Gondry's amateur film workshop, as fitting marketing for a movie about two ne'er-do-wells (Jack Black and Mos Def) who respond to the catastrophic erasure of every tape in the Be Kind Rewind video store by shooting their own versions of such classics as "Ghostbusters," "RoboCop," and "Driving Miss Daisy"—"Sweding" them, to use the film's neologic parlance. (You can watch the duo's Sweded films at www.bekindmovie.com.) Here, Gondry took some time off from set construction to talk about utopia, rules for vacationers, and making your own fun.

Apparently there's a whole slew of amateur re-creations of classic films flying around online. Was that an inspiration for the film? No, no, no. Maybe people could say, oh, Sweding movies, that's a trend, all the kids are doing it

now, but in general I don't care for that kind of thing. Really, the film is based on a very classic comedy idea—someone does something stupid, and then he and his friend find the most absurd way possible to fix the problem, and in so doing, they create something extraordinary; they become heroes. It's like "The Producers," you know, they try everything to fail and wind up with a hit.

By "something stupid," I presume you mean the point in the film when Jack Black's character magnetizes himself... And then erases the tapes, yes, of course. That's the setup. It was very important to me that the whole situation starts with an accident; I didn't want them to be aware of their own creativity, at least not at first. It's only when the corporation comes and destroys all the Sweded tapes that they realize they've made something of value. And their response is then to create something more valuable, a film about their own world, their own community. I have this utopia in my mind, that people can make their own entertainment.

That's very democratic, but doesn't a utopia like that write directors like you out of the picture? I don't think the idea that people should make their own entertainment removes the possibility that they will still enjoy the entertainment that other people make for them. It's more like, what's an activity that could get people out of the house, something that can bring people together, to create?

Hence the workshop at Deitch Projects? A fulfillment of the utopia? Yes, basically. I'm not sure it will work. I'm very anxious about it. Have you seen all the protocols I set up?

Some of these rules do seem a little...specific. "The group will sit on the chairs provided," for instance. "The cameraman will write the definitive storyline on a piece of paper." I believe in rules! It's like, you go on holiday with your friends, and maybe there are ten of you sharing a house for a week, and because there are no rules, no one can decide on anything. And so some people wind up staying awake all night and some of the others are complaining, and in the daytime one person wants to go somewhere and someone else doesn't...in short, the holiday is a disaster. I have no idea whether these rules I've made up are any good, but at least, I'm hoping they create a sense of organization.

Utopia demands a system; any system will do. Utopia, yes, that's probably true. But more to the point—when you're trying to shoot a film in two hours, you'd better have a plan. So I make the plan, just like I make the sets. Working out the details is the fun part, anyway.

—Maya Singer