

Bandslam (2009)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V- 2; L-1 ; S/N-3. Running Time: 1 hour 51 min.

*Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders,
making the most of the time.*

Colossians 4:5

Director Todd Graff and his co-Sa5m, Will, & Charlotte screenwriters: Josh A. Cagan have managed to make a film^{2009 Summit Entertainment} about teen agers that does not feature fart jokes or feature boys and girls ripping their clothes off after know ing each other for 15 minutes. The plot follows the usual formula about outsiders, but has a neat twist at the end.

In Cincinnati Will Burton (newcomer Gaelan Connell) is constantly harassed at his high school. His consolation is writing email letters to his idol David Bowie, although the rock star never replies. Thus Will is happy when Karen, his mom (Lisa Kudrow), quits her job and moves them to Lodi, N.J. On his first day he meets Sa5m—the 5 is silent—(Vanessa Hudgens) who is gorgeous but, maybe because she seems so soured on life, is also an outsider. He also encounters Charlotte (Aly Michalka), once very much the ultimate insider the year before when she was a junior and head of the cheer leading squad and prom queen. Now, for reasons divulged much later, she has dropped out of the school's social whirl to devote herself to her three-piece (and a drum machine!) band struggling hard to find their voice. It seems that the Tri-State Bandslam, a high energy competition for high school bands (definitely not the marching kind!) is an obsession at

the school.

When Charlotte learns that Will is the son of a deceased rock musician she cozies up to him even though he is at least a year younger. Will has grown up resenting his father, but he shares his dad's talent, not for playing music, but for knowing how to arrange it and develop the talents of players. Judging by the scene in which Charlotte invites Will to listen to her and her companions play, he is a combination of Brian Epstein and Phil Spector (minus the latter's murderous tendency, of course).

Will's romantic feelings for Sam thus become complicated by his relationship with Charlotte, the latter looking a bit like Madonna must have when she was a teenager. Quite a few more characters enter the story as Will integrates into the band a drummer, a cellist, a keyboard artist and three brass players, thus developing quite a pleasing sound. Further complicating matters is Ben, Charlotte's former boyfriend who has taken over the band of which she once was a member. How all this works out adds up to enjoyable entertainment. And there is a poignant moment when we learn that Charlotte has made a deal with God, one which leads to her disappointment and embitterment. Lots of energetic music, an ending that is both conventional and yet with a slight twist that shows the power of the Internet. Todd Graff just might inherit the mantle of the late lamented John Hughes if his subsequent films reach. Might be a good film for church youth groups to watch and discuss.

For Reflection/Discussion

Spoilers follow!

1. Is there a character with whom you identify—and if so, which one?

2. What burden of his past is Will bearing?
3. How is Will's mother attempting to keep open the lines of communication with him? What do you think of her as a mom? Compare her to the mothers of most teen comedies.
4. Why is Sam's mother seemingly so down on life that she has buried her talent?
5. What do you think of the bargain that Charlotte made with God? How will such bargains always lead to disappointment? Indeed, can you really bargain with God—or is this actually an attempt to use God to obtain what we want. Compare this to what Jesus did in Matthew 26:36-42.
6. What do you think of Will's insistence that the band find "its own voice" ? How is this important for us all?
7. What do you think of the decision at Bandslam? How is this perhaps a better outcome (sort of like the decision at the end of the fight in Rocky) than found in most teen films? What do you think of the ultimate outcome? Maybe a little over the top, like the climax in Mr. Holland's Opus?
8. How is the high school similar and different from the high school that you know? How are outsiders treated there—and is there anything to be done about it?
9. How did you feel at the end of the film. At what points did you think God was at work?