

ACE VENTURA: WHEN NATURE CALLS (1995)

Arthur Taussig

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Depressed after a failed attempt to rescue a raccoon (in a delightful send up of Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger*), a depressed Ace Ventura (Jim Carrey) enters a Tibetan monastery to regain his composure (a difficult feat for any character played by Jim Carrey). He is brought out of his retreat to recover an albino bat that is sacred to two African tribes, one peaceful and one war-like. The marriage arranged between the two tribes to make a lasting peace will be aborted unless the bat can be recovered. In his role as pet detective, Ace investigates and, after a long series of adventures and mishaps, the goal is achieved, and the wedding and peace treaty are consummated. It turns out the bat was kidnapped by a white man who wants to get rich from the bat guano reserves that would be left behind if the two tribes killed each other off. (Rated PG-13)

Jim Carrey's physical comedy is remarkable. At one point in the film, he walks out of a house following a chimpanzee. He instantly acquires the animal's rolling gait. That's the easy part. What is remarkable is that his arms have seemingly lengthened by about a foot-and-a-half and his body has shortened by the same amount. He lumbers forward a few steps, does a forward somersault, stands up normally (if such a word can be applied to the likes of Carrey), and walks away. Amazing. Carrey's exaggerated physicality reminds one of Jerry Lewis (I wonder how the French will take to Carrey) and the silent slap-stick comedians like Harold Lloyd or Charlie Chaplin. The major difference is that most of the silent and early sound comedians were introverts, while Carrey's characters are the ultimate in extroversion. The older comedians expressed the difficulties of surviving in the adult world, while Carrey and his films are directed at adolescents and the child-like aspects they have not yet shed in their maturation process.

But *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*, as the title indicates, does not consist of physical comedy only. The "When Nature Calls" part of the title is a popular euphemism for the need to urinate. In fact, much of the comedy of this film centers on the various orifices of the human body and the substances that come out of them. Mucus, flatulence, urine, feces, semen, vomit all figure into various comic scenarios (some of which, believe it or not, are actually quite funny, as when he is "born" naked from a mechanical rhino or when he feeds an orphaned bird by regurgitating for it). The fascination with orifices and their functions is a clear indicator of the age level of much of the film's comedy – it varies from early anal-retentive to freshly adolescent. Be forewarned: this film goes beyond defecation and urination jokes – the villain is punished at the end of the film by being raped by a gorilla. Yet this is a funny film. And it is funny because, no matter how mature we are, we all retain traces of these earlier ages within our psyches, lying dormant, ready to be activated. And certainly, a good way to measure our maturity is to inspect it with a film that speaks to our immaturity.

The character of Ace Ventura is adolescence (and pre-adolescence) writ large. His toys, giant cars and animals, his fascination with body functions, his insolence in the face of authority, his always being right, his one-ups-manship, his disregard for other people's property or their physical integrity – these and others are characteristic of childhood. His penchant for loud Hawaiian shirts and his air-stream pompadour hairdo speak to an adolescence held over into adulthood. The loudness goes beyond the shirts: most of the film seems like screaming matches between the various characters.

The whole film can be summed up by a typically adolescent ploy. When a youngster wants to extend his or her power beyond what is permitted, he/she will insult someone and then immediately follow it with a "just kidding" retraction. Whenever *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* broaches a topic where a point could be made (even without detriment to the comedy), it quickly does a "just kidding" routine. This film will doubtless be popular because a major star validates adolescent behavior within a major media event.

Surprisingly, in complete contrast to Ventura's physical and social ineptitude, as a detective and an intellect he is completely apt. He knows the scientific names of every bird, animal, and plant he sees. And this knowledge helps him solve the crime.

The crime is kidnapping an animal. And this brings us to the film's "message." The film is politically correct in the easiest ways. Ventura, an animal lover, is obviously pro-ecology and, for instance, vociferously objects to a woman wearing a fox fur. Yet, no mention is made of his eating meat or wearing leather shoes and belts. While Ventura mouths words about the sacredness of women's bodies and is resistant to seduction by a disrobing woman, in the end it turns out he has deflowered her. Like the average adolescent, what Ventura says and what he does are two completely different things.

On the other hand, political correctness is satirized by the two warring African tribes. The Africa portrayed in this film is one of a nineteenth-century musical comedy, something we might expect from Gilbert and Sullivan. (White Imperialism – in this case the coveting of African guano reserves – is lampooned.) On a more serious note, the film is politically insensitive in its disrespect of local customs of sacredness and ritual. A simple wedding and a revered bat can solve inter-tribal hostilities that may go back hundreds of years. The two tribes, replete with outrageous costumes and makeup – worn all day, every day – are named the Wachatis and the Wachootos perhaps a reference to Tweedledee and Tweedledum (or something from Dr. Suess). The country where the adventure takes place is called Nimibia (Namibia is the correct spelling) and, like most everything in this film, it is a little off.

But all these comedic aspects have serious overtones: substitute the warring Rwandan Hutu and Tutsi tribes for the benign ones in the film, substitute oil or gold reserves for the guano, and you can see that, like all comedies, *Ace Ventura* tackles some very serious issues. Unfortunately, unlike most other comedies, it does not say much about these problems beyond the fact that they exist. Comedy often is used to sugar coat a bitter pill, whereas this film is sugar throughout.

Unfortunately, the filmmakers, given a totally physical comedian, apparently thought that they did not need, or could not, make a cerebral statement. The closest they come are puns like "Friends, rodents, and quadrupeds, lend me your ears." Most of the time they are reduced to using the bottom end of a skunk as a can of mace. They thereby miss an opportunity to follow in the tradition of the great comedies of the past and make a serious statement within a comedic environment. And certainly environmentalism, especially in Africa, is an issue worth inspection. While this film is, on the surface,

politically correct, it is also politically far too easy. The laughs we get, once outside the theater, ring hollow.

Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls. Directed by Steve Oedekerk. Screenplay by Steve Oedekerk. Distributed by Warner Brothers, 1995.