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The Ten

A City Lights Pictures presentation in association with Mega Films and Centrifugal Films of a Wain/Marino production. Produced by Jonathan Stern, Ken Marino, David Wain, Paul Rudd, Morris S. Levy. Executive producers, Danny Fisher, Sam Zietz, Jack Fisher, Michael Almog. Co-producers, Derrick Tseng, Marcus Lansdell, Max Sinovoi, Michael Califra, Joe Fisher, Michael Bassick. Directed by David Wain. Screenplay, Ken Marino, Wain.

With: Paul Rudd, Famke Janssen, Winona Ryder, Jessica Alba, Adam Brody, Gretchen Mol, Justin Theroux, A.D. Miles, Oliver Platt, Ken Marino, Rod Corrdry, Keri Kenney-Silver, Liev Schreiber, Jo Lo Truglio, Mather Zickel, Michael Ziegfield, Jason Sudeikis, Ron Silver, Bobby Canavale, Cedric Sanders, Arlen Escarpeta.

By Dennis Harvey

A crazy-quilt of semi-interwoven sketches inspired by those tablets Moses brought down from the mountain, "The Ten" is anything but a morally corrective night out. Second feature from duo David Wain and Ken Marino of comedy group the State is, like their "Wet Hot American Summer," uneven but often hilarious. Bad-taste quotient is cranked up here, ditto the overall conceptual giddiness. Since ye olden days of "Kentucky Fried Movie" this sort of sketch omnibus has usually been more a cult than mainstream commercial attraction, but likely modest theatrical life should precede a long career in ancillary.

Only Christians with a very liberal sense of humor are likely to enjoy "The Ten." Even lay viewers will need to be tolerant of gags as envelope-pushing as anything in "Borat."

That said, "The Ten" doesn't go out of its way to blaspheme or otherwise poke fun at religion; ADDED: it's simply that nothing is sacred, and the tastelessness is almost always funny first and nasty second -- which is more than can be said for most mainstream comedies.

Seemingly stream-of-consciousness, a la "Hellzapoppin'" and Monty Python, pic packs a near-surreal mix of outrageousness and deadpan, expertly packaged by director Wain.

Framing device has Paul Rudd (riffing priceless) as our host on a black soundstage with giant tablets bearing the Commandments. He introduces each ordered segment, but is continually sidetracked by, among other things, his floundering relationship with girlfriends (Famke Janssen, Jessica Alba).

The vignettes sprawl unpredictably. In the first ("Thou shalt have no other god before me"), Stephen (Adam Brody) goes skydiving with fiancée Kelly (Winona Ryder) -- but neglects to wear his parachute. He ends up grotesquely planted waist-deep in a field, and will not survive being extricated. His plight attracts national attention, a quasi-religious following, copycat jumpers, even a network sitcom.

Subsequent bits also use the commandments as the barest pretext for perverse scenarios that are morally ambivalent -- or just morally oblivious. Virginal 35-year-old librarian Gloria (Gretchen

Mol) finally has the torrid time of her dreams during a Mexican vacation, with a swarthy handyman named Jesus (Justin Theroux). An incredibly arrogant surgeon (Marino) who plays a fatal prank on a patient can't believe he's actually sent to prison since it was "just a goof." Later on (in perhaps the most conceptually challenging seg) the surgeon's story continues in prison as a tale of brutal sexual abuse told in the pop-psych tones of soap opera

Bizarre conceit for "Honor Thy Mother and Father" has dark-skinned young twins (Cedric Sanders, Arlen Escarpeta) begging suburban WASP mom (Kerri Kenney-Silver) to reveal their real father's identity.

"The Ten" also includes cartoon "The Lying Rhino," a fable related among crackheads. Delightfully animated by Aaron Augenblick, it is, like so much else here, extremely rude, invigoratingly arbitrary, and awfully funny.

Chock full of admired but not quite A-list talent, "The Ten" looks and acts like it called in a lot of happily granted favors. All production values are smooth enough to belie the purported \$5.25 mil budget, from crowd scenes to soundtracked songs. Thesps all seem to be richly enjoying themselves, without getting too broad or wink-wink about it. In particular Ryder, who hasn't had an easy professional or public time of late, seems to be letting off joyful steam in a vignette in which she finds true love on her wedding night not with the groom, but rather with something not exactly human, animal or even animate.

Camera (color), Yaron Orbach; editor, Eric Kissack; music, Craig Wedren; music supervisor, Tracy McKnight; production designer, Mark White; art director, Matt Munn; set decorator, Lisa Scoppa; costume designer, Sarah J. Holden; sound (Dolby Digital), Lew Goldstein; animation, Aaron Augenblick; assistant director, Christo Morse; casting, Beth Bowling, Kim Miscia. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Midnight), Jan. 20, 2007. Running time: 99 MIN.