

## Drew Barrymore makes directorial debut with female empowerment flick

Written by Kam Williams

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17 year-old Bliss Lavendar (Ellen Page) is a small-town girl who has reluctantly entered the Miss Bluebonnet Beauty Pageant by her domineering mother (Marcia Gay Harden). Sadly, her henpecked father (Daniel Stern) is of no help, since he's so afraid of his wife that he secretly watches football games in his van.

What we have here is a tragic case of a parent attempting to live vicariously through a child, since Mrs. Lavendar sorely wants to see her daughter win a competition she never could herself at that age. She's even desperate enough to spend \$800 of her hard-earned pay as a mail carrier on a custom-made rhinestone-encrusted gown just for the occasion.

In reality, however, Bliss is a rough-and-tumble tomboy who'd rather be a jammer on the Hurl Scouts, the all-girl roller derby team that competes in an arena in nearby Austin, Texas. But she seems already too busy to fit anything else into her schedule, between preparing for college and her after school job as a waitress at the Oink Joint, Home of the Squealer.

Nonetheless, curiosity gets the better of Bliss, so one day she surreptitiously hitches a ride from Bodeen to the big city on a Bingo bus full of senior citizens. She attends a tryout for the Hurl Scouts, where she makes fast friends with Maggie Mayhem (Kristen Wiig), a veteran who shows her the ropes.

Bliss can't help but notice that the rest of her teammates have equally-punny monikers, including Smashley Simpson (Barrymore), Eva Destruction (Ari Graynor) and token black Rosa Sparks (Eve), to name a few. So, it's no surprise when Coach Razor (Andrew Wilson) gives his raw recruit a nickname of her own, Babe Ruthless.

Despite all the bumps and bruises, Bliss takes to the sport, though deciding to tell her mother she's enrolled in an SAT prep course instead of the truth. This sets up the classic "one big lie which must be hidden at all costs" premise which underpins *Whip It*, an estrogen-fueled, female empowerment flick based on Shauna Cross' novel of the same name. The movie marks the directorial debut of Drew Barrymore who had the wherewithal to assemble a very talented cast to play an array of colorful characters, from the smarmy emcee (Jimmy Fallon) to the tattooed butch (Juliette Lewis).

The cliché-ridden plot thickens predictably when the Hurl Scouts' make the playoffs and the championship game against their cross-town rivals, the Holy Rollers, is scheduled for the same night as the Bluebonnet Pageant. At that juncture, the tension builds around whether Bliss will follow her heart or capitulate to her mother's wishes?

Pleasant, if formulaic, *Whip It* is mostly a mindless diversion designed to hold your interest via a profusion of such teensploit staples as the gratuitous hot tub party and the cafeteria food fight. Juno on roller skates!

### **Very Good (2.5 stars)**

Rated PG-13 for sexuality, profanity, crude humor and drug use.

Running time: 111 minutes

Studio: Fox Searchlight

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To see a trailer for Whip It, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQGPdXnb2Gg>