

Vote for Nacho

By [Josef Woodard](#), June 22, 2006

Nacho Libre

Jack Black, Ana de la Reguera, and Darius Rose star in a film written by Jared and Jerusha Hess and Mike White, and directed by Jared Hess.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Jared Hess is out to save Hollywood from itself, and he's doing a smash-up job so far. Granted, the assessment is based on only two times at bat, but Hess clearly has something precious and needed: a new comic voice. We first got a taste of this zinger zeitgeist with *Napoleon Dynamite*, presumably a summer sleeper teen comedy, but instead one of the greatest American films of recent years, and one with a new twist on the concept of dry comedy, sneakily lubed with compassion.

Hess's follow-up, *Nacho Libre*, isn't on that level of revelation, but its strange dry wit and sweetness beneath the satire satisfies from beginning to end. Many times during the film — your basic “Mexican friar with dreams of wrestling glory” comedy (!) — our excessive time spent in multiplexes lead us to expect the usual crass punch line or other weary-assed Hollywood clichés, which thankfully never arrive. Even the fart jokes are charming.

Hess, with his kookily charismatic star Jack Black in the camera's crosshairs, delivers another unexpected, and unexpectedly tender, bit of comic invention from the outskirts. Like the Preston, Idaho setting of *Napoleon*, the rural Mexico context of the new film presents a milieu normally far off Hollywood's radar.

Among the taboos gently broached in Hess's film is the idea that tubby people are humans, too. Black, a Mexican monk at an orphanage who can't let go his obsession with being a wrestler, makes no attempt to hide his girth, which often bulges convexly out of his comic book-esque wrestler's costume. The “fat kid” orphan Chanchó (Darius Rose) is the most endearing screen character of his size since the little big guy in *Bad Santa*. On the other end of the appeal spectrum is the beneficent hottie Sister Encarnación (Ana de la Reguera), who fuels Nacho's dreams of a life possibly beyond vows of celibacy.

The film was dazzlingly shot in Mexico, mostly in Oaxaca, and with both cool economy and dynamism in the wrestling ring, by Mexican cinematographer Xavier Pérez Grobet. The soundtrack sizzles, with tunes by Esquivel, Beck, and Los Lobos among others you haven't heard of, but want to know more about. Black himself, a wunnerfully goofy, wannabe Freddie Mercury, sings a loopy, seemingly off-the-cuff love song in the locker room, and then croons on the very tail of the end credits (that's a stick-around-to-the-end alert).

What could have been culturally or racially dubious is — mostly, anyway — a celebration of a slice of Mexican life, however set into farcical relief. This also is the first major movie to deal with the fantastical, ornately visual domain of Mexican wrestling, a surreal culture unto itself. Ditto Black himself.