

ENTERTAINMENT



Hollywood's Blockbuster Summer Continues To Disappoint Critic

By SEAN SMITH

It's not that this film ("Men In Black II") was horrible. In fact if you haven't seen the first "Men in Black" or haven't been to a summer blockbuster in the past few years then this film could be quite entertaining. Unfortunately most Americans don't fit into that category. For those of us who have seen the original or have gone to the movies in the past few years, this film was cliché, boring, predictable, uninteresting and filled with horribly blatant and annoying product placements.

The film is largely a remake of the first with enough changes in cast and aliens to make it tolerably different. That means if you have to use the restroom or go to the concession stand you won't miss much.

The plot is basically the same as the last: save earth from destruction by a particularly nasty alien. This time, though, the alien is Serleena, a shape-shifter who takes the form of a scantily clad Lara Flynn Boyle in an ad for Victoria's Secret (another unsubtle ad, but more on that later). Serleena has come to earth to find her enemies' secret energy, "the light of Zartha," which was hidden 25 years earlier on earth.

Only agent Kay (Tommy Lee Jones) knows where the light is, but he has been "neuralized" and now is working in a post office in a small Massachusetts town. Agent Jay (Will Smith) has to get to him before the aliens do, restore his memory and destroy the alien menace.

Simple plot for an even simpler movie. Along the way we get a laundry list of alien baddies and weak one-liners.

While there seemed to be a genuine chemistry between Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith in the first film, their relationship in this version is flat and phlegmatic. I got the feeling that both of these actors were mailing in their performances and waiting for the big checks to roll in.

Speaking of big checks, corporate consolidation has gone too far. Not only did I have to sit through a barrage of ads before the film started, but I'm also treated (sarcastic use) to hundreds of mini commercials throughout the film. Okay I get it! I'm supposed to eat at Burger King, carry and use a Sprint cell phone, drive a Mercedes and wear Ray Ban sunglasses.

Unfortunately what was cool and original in 1997 is now cliché. All the make-up and CGI effects of the original have been copied and over used by just about every other filmmaker in Hollywood. In MIB II, the CGI is seamless and done extremely well, but it is totally uninspired. Rather than being original, director Barry Sonnenfeld has moved into the realm of gross-out humor. For instance, in a brief scene we're introduced to a bad guy from Ballchinia, who has a scrotum for a chin. Funny stuff, I tell you. We also meet the horribly un-funny worm guys, who are supposed to bring comic relief to the film but succeed in only getting groans.

MOVIE REVIEW: He Said/He Said

'Men in Black II,' 'Powerpuff Girls' Are More Blech Than Powerful

By PETE BROOKS



Although both of the movies I saw last weekend were stinkers, I only resent one of them.

The films in question are "Men in Black II" and "Powerpuff Girls." Of the two, "Powerpuff Girls" was the more admirable effort.

So let's start with the next dud from both Will Smith and director Barry Sonnenfeld, and work our way up to the kids' cartoon.

Both Smith and Sonnenfeld seem to have hit rough patches in their respective careers. Their last joint effort was the notoriously poorly-received "Wild Wild West"; since then Sonnenfeld delivered the d.o.a. "Little Trouble" earlier this year, while Smith drew critical praise but commercial indifference with his portrayal of Muhammed Ali in last year's inert "Ali."

I think the bloom is off the rose, fellas.

Besides having almost no story whatsoever — a fault which, honestly, I can easily overlook if everything else is working — the whole thing has a perfunctory, rote feeling to it. From the uninspired performances, to the editing — just slightly off throughout — to the non-existent story, this seems like a movie where everybody involved just punched a timeclock.

It starts promisingly enough with Patrick Warburton playing Agent Jay's new partner in a couple early scenes.

Warburton, recently of "Seinfeld" and Fox's late, lamented live-action "Tick" series, delivers a hilarious, though brief, performance, before being taken out for pie and having his memory wiped by a neuralizer-happy Agent Jay (Smith).

After that it's plot schmott. Most of the movie is spent following agents Jay and Kay (Tommy Lee Jones) around while they try to retrieve the older man's missing memories.

So what?

In the same perfunctory way, all our other old favorites from the first one are trotted dutifully out.

Tony Shaloub's shopkeeper Jeebs is back, in a scene that runs way too long.

The coffee-loving worm guys have an expanded role this time, as does Frank the Pug. The rest of the crowd seemed to find the talking dog bit much more hilarious than I did. "Mr. Ed" was cutting-edge comedy — 35 years ago.

The much-ballyhooed Michael Jackson cameo is funny for about the first half of the 30 seconds it goes on; the last 15 seconds seem too genuinely cloying and needy to be anything but creepy.

Jones is dependably gruff and growly

The film's primary saving grace is that it is mercifully short, clocking in at around 80 minutes, including the end credits and opening cartoon (a silly computer animated sci-fi spoof that was as interesting as some of the QuickTime movies that are forwarded to me via e-mail on a weekly basis).

On a brighter and somewhat better note, "The Powerpuff Girls Movie," although problematic, is a good attempt at bringing the girls to the big screen. That said, though, this film is a definite wait-for-video movie.

Being a huge fan of the Powerpuff Girls, I was really looking forward to this film. But like the recent spate of cartoons stretched to feature length films that have come to the multiplex lately, this movie really doesn't deserve big-screen status.

Based on Cartoon Network's ingenious and inventive animated show about three kindergartners who happen to be superheroes, the film picks as its primary plot device an unexplored part of the program's lore, the origin of the girls.

Unfortunately, this original and story-rich territory is covered in the first few minutes of the movie. There, in a montage of shots, we find out that Professor Untonium is frustrated with life in the crime-ridden city of Townsville and wants to bring sweetness to into this cruel world. By mixing together sugar, spice and everything nice, he hopes to create a perfect daughter.

This is where the originality dies. From the initial scenes we're given what could have been a fantastic half-hour episode of the show, but having been stretched over an 80-minute period, the film becomes redundant. The best example of this is a scene where the girls play tag and nearly destroy the city as they discover their powers. In the TV show, this scene may have lasted only 30 seconds. On the big screen, though, we're given nearly 10 minutes of the game, which is about 9 minutes and 30 seconds too long. The climactic battle against the evil Mojo Jo Jo (whose origins are also hinted at in the opening scenes) also drags on and on and on.

There are some bright spots and very smart allusions made in this film, but they are found few and far between. The biggest laugh comes when the always-brooding buttercup yells at one of Mojo Jo Jo's minions, "Get your hands off me you dirty ape."

The movie is a bit darker than the TV version, but fans will be happy that all of the program's charm and creativity are present; it's just spread too thin.

This week, I'd suggest going to your local art house and seeing a movie that you wouldn't normally see. There are a lot of really good films out right now — you just won't find them in your local multiplex.

throughout, Smith's act is, frankly, beginning to seem a little forced, and even the brilliant Rip Torn (Zed) is off his "A" game here.

In the end, I resent this movie's blarney because it had the possibility of goofy greatness in it. "Men in Black," the original, is a really beautifully crafted piece of cinematic hokum.

This could have been — should have been — more of the same.

"Powerpuff Girls," on the other hand...

I showed up knowing nothing — at all — about the eponymous damsels. But I wasn't worried, or even appalled at my lack of preparation — I knew the children would show me the way.

Sure enough, after only a couple of minutes, I heard a girl in the next row complaining to her father about the movie screen, "Daddy, that television is too big!" And right there you have the appeal of the Cartoon Network's Powerpuff Girls.

For my fellow uninitiated, the Powerpuff Girls are three laboratory-created little pixies with Superman-level super powers, and no competent supervision at all.

They fly around a lot and break lots of stuff — like buildings and cities. The kids in the crowd ate it up.

A bad guy emerges to take advantage of their wide-eyed naivete and a battle royal ensues.

Did I mention the kids loved it?

There are moments thrown in for the grown-ups, but not many. My favorite recurring bit was the two metal-heads who speak exclusively in Van Halen song titles.

Otherwise, the action is non-stop, but consistently in an unthreatening, cartoon way.

I'm pretty sure they didn't run this script past PETA, however. Not only are there scores of ape-monsters with their brains exposed and shoved out the top of their heads, but most of these super-villain chimps meet pretty gruesome onscreen deaths. Sure, it's just a cartoon, but at one point it is literally raining ape carcasses.

My only real complaint about the film is that there are too many extended strobe sequences. Between the constant flashing lights and the girls' huge, dilated, unblinking eyes flying around in circles, my own head began to spin. Really.

Parents are advised to avert their gaze periodically if they don't want to get a headache watching this film.

Kids? The kids'll love it.