

'Spawn' lacks story, acting

By Winfred B. Cross
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Spawn

Starring: Michael Jai White, John Leguizamo, Martin Sheen, Theresa Randle and Nicol Williamson
Directed by Mark Dippe
New Line Cinema

☆ 1/2

Turning a wildly popular comic book into a movie is a foreboding task. If you get it right, true fans and the curious will flock to the film. Get it wrong and the studio is stuck with a huge bill.

The movie version of "Spawn," Todd McFarlane's dark and brooding version of "Dante's Inferno," gets a lot of stuff right. It sticks closely to the comic book, which will no doubt satisfy fans. But the movie may have trouble pleasing a big audience.

It's not that the story isn't interesting. Al Simmons (Michael Jai White) is a trained assassin who's betrayed and killed by his boss, Jason Wynn (Martin Sheen). He goes to Hell, where he's offered the chance to lead Malebogia's (the devil, I think) army to start Armageddon and burn down heaven. In return, he gets to see his wife Wanda (the often under-used Theresa Randle).

Five years pass and Simmons returns to Earth where he eventually turns into Spawn, a warrior with incredible powers and weapons. He's followed around by Clown (the odd John Leguizamo), a hell-grown mutant with a sadistic streak. But Cogliostro - once a bad guy now turned good (Nicol Williamson) - wants to work for good and pits him against Clown and Malebogia.

The problem is the execution. The story unravels in fragments. It's hard to follow if you are not familiar with the comic book. Also, not much attention was given to the script. None of Leguizamo's one-liners are funny, nor is much of the dialogue even interesting. White's lines consist of monosyllabic phrases which he delivers with little conviction.



Spawn (Michael Jai White) is about to be attacked by Violator.

None of the acting is convincing. Sheen is much too hammy as Wynn (Doesn't he look a lot like Wayne Newton with all that black dye in his hair?).

Leguizamo is the most interesting, in an irritating way. He has the right attitude, but the jokes are stale and fall flat most of the time.

The film's redeeming moments come in the special effects, which, for the most part, are dazzling. Spawn's cape and chains - a living outer shell - do incredible things. The computer generated cape is a stunning crimson color. It renders him invisible or forms various shields. The chains grasp, crunch, crush and sever objects and creatures.

The effects run amuck in the hell scenes. The computer generation becomes busy and it's hard to tell what's going on. The

Animatronic effects aren't very scary. Malebogia looks like a Muppet on steroids. Violator - Clown's true form - is better, but hardly registers a blip on the scare scale.

The most aggravating aspect of "Spawn" is the hype that this is the first time an African American super hero has been featured in a film. Not true. Robert Townsend's mildly entertaining "Meteor Man" had that distinction. Also, Spawn is a convoluted character which is basically evil. That's nothing to be proud of, African American or not.

Rating:
☆☆☆☆ Classic;
☆☆☆☆ Excellent;
☆☆☆ Good;
☆☆ Fair;
☆ Why?;

No Stars Given - A mess.

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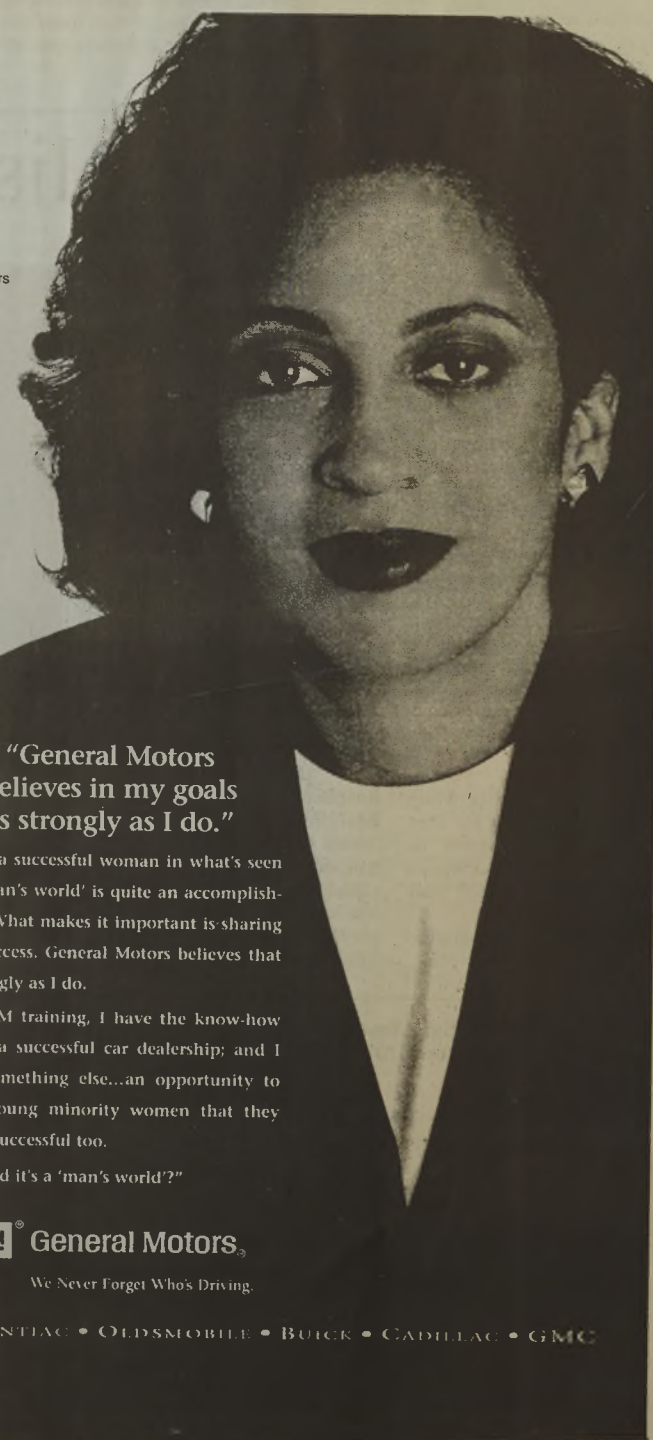
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