



"The Wonder Boys" boasts an all-star cast, including (left to right) Robert Downey Jr., Katie Holmes, Tobey Maguire and Michael Douglas.

Smart Screenplay Creates Success for 'Wonder Boys'

By JEREMY HURTZ
Staff Writer

Director Curtis Hanson's last picture, the 1997 neo-noir "L.A. Confidential," was a perfect film. Hanson's follow-up, "The Wonder Boys," is a smart, human comedy about a novelist (Michael Douglas) struggling to write a follow-up to his best-selling book.

MOVIE REVIEW

"The Wonder Boys"



Douglas' Grady suffers from writer's block. He copes by churning out thousands of uninteresting, aimless manuscript pages. His editor (Robert Downey Jr.) has flown in to check his progress. Grady has impregnated the chancellor (Frances McDormand) of the university where he teaches writing classes. One of his students, James (Tobey Maguire), is brilliant and suicidal; another (Katie Holmes) wants to sleep with him. His wife left this morning. Douglas' wry voice-over lends the film a great authorial tone. His charming cynicism and good comic-timing are surprising. Downey also turns in an excellent performance. Steve Kloves packs his screenplay with smart allusions and hilarious quips. An incestuous relationship is referred to as "the Chinatown thing." In another scene, James attends a lecture in which a successful writer uses a particularly trite metaphor ("reaching

the far shore of accomplishment"). The audience has just enough time to groan before James bursts out laughing.

But while the screenplay is unquestionably smart, it's not always wise. Like "L.A. Confidential," there's a lot of plot to cover. Unlike that movie, some characters get lost in the shuffle.

Holmes' Hannah doesn't seem to belong in the film at all. She's flat, and the most she does to advance the story is look up a number in a phone book.

Others have issued criticism that "The Wonder Boys" wanders. And it does - but that's because Grady does too. One character observes that he "didn't make any choices" when writing his new manuscript. Neither does the film choose what, precisely, it's trying to say until its final moments.

Ultimately, the movie tells a story about finding one's role in life, accepting responsibility and moving on. It's an examination of how to handle success, and what it means to be a writer. Considering the obvious parallels between Grady's predicament and filmmaker Hanson's situation, the observations this movie makes can apply to any storytelling art form.

The ending is a little pat. Problems wrap up easily. But we feel as if the movie has come very close to honestly earning its upbeat finale - and that's one of the most difficult things for a story to accomplish, in any medium.

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Film Focuses on Historical Chinese Ruler

By FERRIS MORRISON
Staff Writer

Film has truly become a window in which one can view a nation's culture.

While it probably won't reach most of mainstream America, "The Emperor and the Assassin" is a one that masterfully depicts a chapter of China's tumultuous history.

MOVIE REVIEW

"The Emperor and the Assassin"



The film chronicles the rise of Ying Zheng, the power-hungry king of Qin, who dreams of uniting the seven kingdoms of China

into one under his rule.

To complete this feat, Ying enlists the help of his beautiful concubine Zhao, played by Gong Li. Zhao goes to Han to befriend the king and encourage him to find an assassin for Ying, part of the leaders plan for unity. While in Han, she finds the assassin Jing Ke, but ends up falling in love with him.

Director Chen Kaige is internationally renowned for his direction of "Farewell My Concubine," which won a Golden Globe in 1994 for Best Foreign Language Film and was Oscar-nominated for Cinematography and Best Foreign Language Film.

In "The Emperor and the Assassin," Chen reflects the majesty of the king-

dom of Qin through his cinematography. Royal court members are shot in center screen, framed on each side with lanterns, tapestries or other decorations.

The technique contrasts the American tradition of film, which places action off-center to make the shot more visually appealing. But in "The Emperor and the Assassin," placing the courtiers center screen highlights their prominent position and emphasizes the importance of symmetry in Chinese culture.

The details in the set and costumes, the result of a film budget hailed to be the largest ever for a Chinese production, prove impressive.

While the somewhat unemotional depiction of the story leaves audiences

without tears or laughter, the coldness adds to Chen's artful illustration of ancient China. Despite the love-triangle circumstances, the characters hold the appropriate solemnity of the royal court.

Unfortunately, most audiences will be intimidated by the subtitles, considering the film too daunting to watch and read at the same time.

But with its grace and artistry, "The Emperor and the Assassin" is sure to be another Oscar-worthy film for Chen. As an example of just how beautiful film can be, it is destined to become an international classic.

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Gothic Film Festival to Feature Classic Horror Flicks

By ALLISON ROST
Staff Writer

Downtown Durham will play host to ax murderers and monsters this weekend. But fear not - these creatures of the night will be only on the big screen.

The Nevermore Horror & Gothic Film Festival runs Friday through Sunday at Durham's Carolina Theatre, featuring old classics and new favorites.

Jim Carl, director of programming at the Carolina Theatre, said the horror festival was a long time in coming.

"The films of that genre aren't shown on the big screen anymore," he said.

The Nevermore festival grew out of the popularity of the theatre's Retrofantasma film series.

About a year ago, the Carolina Theatre decided to show "Evil Dead 2" as a one-time event, not expecting a large turnout. When 300 people came, it spawned Retrofantasma.

The Retrofantasma series shows a horror film bimonthly. Word-of-mouth and the good-time gothic mood that the series offers has increased its popularity.

"It's a very lively atmosphere with everyone clapping and cheering," Carl said.

Carl decided to expand on the concept by passing out survey cards at Retrofantasma showings and asking for recommendations. The playlist for this weekend was crafted from those suggestions.

Carl said most Retrofantasma atten-

dees were under 30, so the theatre anticipated a younger crowd for this weekend's festival.

Many of the films came out before college-age students were old enough to see them on the big screen, Carl said. The festival gives younger viewers an opportunity to see them in their original 35mm format and get a different experience than video can provide.

Four of the 11 films have also never been screened in North Carolina: "Titus," "The Stendhal Syndrome," "Day of the Beast" and "The Item."

Carl said films such as "The Exorcist" and "The Shining" are in the "bring back" category, and two classic horror films from the 1930s are also featured. Mel Brooks' campy classic "Young Frankenstein" is being shown as

a family offering.

Films are not the only entertainment this weekend. On Saturday night, Joshua Kane will perform "Tales of Terror: Edgar Allan Poe."

Carl enthusiastically explained the festival's appeal: the films bring back memories of silver-screen favorites for older generations, while today's youth might remember staying up late to catch them on the tube.

"It's that old nostalgia feel." Admission is \$5 for students; Saturday's live performance is \$15.

For more information, call 560-3040.

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