

'Mars Attacks!' Part Deux

Spielberg's latest aims to shock, awe

BY ALAN HAYES
STAFF WRITER

Steven Spielberg is pissed. Or at least he should be.

His latest addition to the summer blockbuster genre, "War of the Worlds" — a science fiction extravaganza based on H.G. Wells' 1898 novel of the same name — is not that bad. Sure, it has its fair share of plot holes and the hokiest ending this side of a Disney cartoon, but as far as big-budget action-thrillers go, "War of the Worlds" is pretty good.

So, why should the film's modest appeal be a thorn in the side of one of the most prolific and popular directors of the modern era?

Two words: Tom Cruise. Unless you've been living under a rock for the past two months, you know that Cruise — alongside a whiny and waifish Dakota Fanning — is the star of Spielberg's latest epic and, per the usual modus operandi, has a presence on the summer talk show circuit as of late, ostensibly to promote his newest role.

However, you are probably also aware that Cruise has spent far more time espousing his love for new fiancée Katie Holmes and evangelizing for the Church of Scientology, which is suddenly a pop-culture buzzword.

Spielberg, as one of the most prominent American filmmakers over the past two decades, probably knows better than anyone that there is no such thing as bad publicity. However, somewhere deep inside Spielberg's soul, there has to

be a part of him crying out against Cruise's shameless self-promotion. After all, the director is an artist and his new film does not offer evidence to the contrary.

Spielberg's cinematic technique combines the gritty hand-held realism he used to great effect in "Saving Private Ryan" with the seamless implementation of some stunning CGI Martian war machines. The eye candy stands alongside vibrant, Technicolor set design and just enough flashing lights to remind viewers of the film's 1953 iteration.

It is likely that, as an artist, Spielberg would rather people see his films out of an interest in his cinematic talents or the subject matter rather than a passing curiosity about the eccentricities (read: craziness) of the film's star.

Why is this hack famous, anyway? It seems that Cruise cemented his role as a Hollywood icon in films like "Risky Business," "Cocktail" and "Top Gun" and has been on — I can't resist — "Cruise" control ever since.

People seem to simply accept his constant promotion of Scientology — a religion founded in the 1950s by science-fiction author (red flag, anyone?) L. Ron Hubbard — as just another Hollywood quirk. A little research on the space-age belief system, though, reveals Cruise to be less "Ellen Degeneres quirky" and more "Michael Jackson insane."

And like Scientology — and any sci-fi movie worth its intergalactic salt — the premise for "War of



COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Tim Robbins (left), Tom Cruise and Dakota Fanning try and elude some stealthy alien invaders in Steven Spielberg's latest summer blockbuster.

the Worlds" is out there, featuring Martians hell-bent on a takeover of planet Earth by way of a complete extermination of its current population.

Spielberg manages to keep the extraterrestrial fantasy firmly grounded in reality, though — something that can't be said for Cruise — by interjecting a taste of real-life tragedy.

As the alien onslaught begins, Fanning — as Cruise's daughter — shrieks "Is it the terrorists?" a question later echoed by Cruise's rebellious teenage son. The 9/11 references, along with later conversations between refugees from the destruction who ask each other "Did you lose anyone?" give the film a relevance that a straight adaptation of Wells' century-old novel

MOVIE REVIEW 'WAR OF THE WORLDS'

★★★

could never have done.

Despite the distraction of his recent public outbursts, Cruise is at least believable in his role as a bad dad. How could he not be when, compared to some of the tenets of Scientology, which include a belief in a "galactic tyrant" named Xenu, the premise of the Spielberg version of "War of the Worlds" — aliens riding lightning bolts in to war machines buried beneath the Earth's crust a million years ago — seems downright plausible?

Contact the A & E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Esthero's latest CD was worth the wait

Tackles relationships, collaborations

BY JOHN COGGIN
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

I have waited eight long years for Esthero to release another full-length follow-up to one of the few albums in my CD collection that continues to get consistent rotation in the car stereo.

That album was *Breath from Another*, and it is the best album by a Canadian trip-hop, jazz, R&B, big-band pop artist ever, in my book.

I loved it because Esthero's lyrics often seemed glued together by some unspoken sexual in-joke that she would take to the grave with her.

With a Bjork-like voice but a pop sensibility for songs about really weird relationships, she was exactly the kind of exotic distraction from suburbia a fifteen-year-old boy needed.

She's back with more of the same trip-hop beats and noxious harmonies, backing up a glorious mix of melancholy love letters and sassy kiss-offs to past lovers.

But during her hiatus, she diversified her arsenal of style choices a bit — a point in which many critics have found grounds for complaint.

However, this reviewer has, since receiving the album in the mail from the kind people at Reprise Records, reveled in the album's schizophrenic love of, well, everything.

The first single "We R in Need of a Musical ReVoLuTion" is rock 'n' roll; the album's title track is big band; and "Everyday is a Holiday (with You)" — a collaboration with Sean Lennon — sounds like a walk through Central Park in the spring.

Yes, the album begs for a little more cohesiveness; however, Esthero adapts her voice to each new musical environment with skill that not even fellow Canadian pop tart Nelly Furtado (with whom she has collaborated) managed to conjure on her last effort. Furtado's "Folklore" was a sloppy piling on of

MUSIC REVIEW

ESTHERO
WIKKED LI'L' GRRRLS

★★★★

genre-loyal tracks that shared no common thread.

"Wikked Lil' Grrrls" is beautifully complete in its eclecticism because Esthero successfully weaves her sexy mystique into every tripped-out beat.

Layers of vocals on "Blanket Me in You (Never is so Soon)" bleed into the clipped beat and Cuban percussion and horns, spawning one of the most listenable songs released this year. (I only hope that the label, which has been pushing this album surprisingly wholeheartedly, realizes that this is the single to send to radio — not "ReVoLuTion.")

Lyrical, Esthero sometimes sounds like she just stepped off the stage of "Def Poetry Jam."

"Will you let me lick you with illiteration and tie you up in similes?" is one of several lines that stinks of the awkward, self-conscious poeticizing of one of Mos Def's guests on the late-night HBO series.

Also, fans might be slightly disappointed when she drops the pop act and reverts to standard-issue R&B during the entire second half of the album.

Don't get me wrong: Again, she sounds perfectly comfortable in such fixings; it simply doesn't live up to the first half of the album.

Nonetheless, "Gone" (featuring Cee-Lo Green) sounds like the masterpiece Babyface never produced and is the most genuinely tender song Esthero's ever performed, and Cee-Lo actually sounds pretty good crooning along with her for a bit at the end.

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New hero flick less than super

BY JOHN COGGIN
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

When it comes to Hollywood adaptations of comic books, superhero fans have had a lot to celebrate lately.

Sam Raimi brought Spiderman to stunningly epic life — not once, but twice.

Bryan Singer managed to juggle a giant cast of movie stars in one of the best realized and most topical of modern comic movies, "X2."

And only a couple of weeks ago Christopher Nolan showed us that he has single-handedly turned around the Batman franchise and created what this reviewer dares to deem a superior interpretation to Tim Burton's attempt at Batman 16 years ago.

Given the undeniable success of the films listed above, fanboys everywhere had plenty of reason to believe that as the big-budget adaptation of "Fantastic Four" went into production, the studio suits had finally learned their lesson: Simply sit back, keep your hands to yourself and let the auteur mold his opus.

The guys at aintitcool.com et al should have known better.

Not only is "Fantastic Four" clearly the product of committee research and Weinstein-like micromanagement, the director chosen to oversee its creation is as far from an auteur as any filmmaker can get.

His name is Tim Story, and "Taxi" and "Barbershop" are the two most noteworthy films on his resume. This never boded well for "Fantastic Four."

Directors Sam Raimi and Chris Nolan before him realized that one cannot adapt a comic as-is to the screen. Each director guided their films with a distinct tone and voice that did not necessarily offer a pixel-perfect reflection of

the camp of the source material but was close enough — and more importantly, consistent enough — that few males under the age of 45 could deny taking some enjoyment in watching Spiderman swing gleefully through the New York skyline in either of Raimi's films.

Story fails miserably at this task. Not only does he fail to capture the tone of the comics upon which the film is based, but he fails to pin down a single tone at all. The film teeters between the sinister camp of Julian McMahon's villainous CEO, Victor Von Doom and the cheesy machismo of Chris Evans' Johnny Storm, who spews one-liners more often than a Tinseltown starlet does her lunch.

To add insult to injury, someone — he likely owns jets and lots of Armani suits — has edited the living crap out of Story's film. Character "development" — I think that's what it's supposed to be — happens at a breakneck speed and rarely moves forward the clunky plot. Even cinema novices will notice the giant gaping holes

MOVIE REVIEW 'FANTASTIC FOUR'

★

in the dialogue and story.

And the big action scenes — there are only two, but hey, who's counting? — inexplicably lack certain requisite special effects shots showcasing the troupe's powers.

It appears as if either the guys in charge of effects never quite mastered Mr. Fantastic's "stretch"

power or (more likely) the execs at 20th Century Fox realized early they had a stinker on their hands and were unwilling to commit more money to post-production effects work. In the shots where they do show Ioan Gruffudd's arms flying around like silly putty, the effects fail to live up to even the standards of PlayStation 2.

So, if you want my advice, go see "Batman Begins" instead.

Contact the A & E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

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7:10, 9:30, SAT/SUN 2:10, 4:30

Chelsea

7:30, SAT, SUN, WEDS, 1:45, 4:40
THE WILD PARROTS
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