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# Eric S. Elkins

Film Reviews & Interviews

(some have not aged well, sorry)

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INTERVIEW

# A Chat with Phil Alden Robinson, Director of *The Sum of All Fears*

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~June 2002

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Phil Alden Robinson probably isn't the first director you'd think of to breathe new life into the Jack Ryan saga with *Sum of All Fears*. Best known as the scribe and director of *Field of Dreams* and *Sneakers*, his most recent work, other than directing the highly acclaimed first episode of *Band of Brothers* and the powerful TV movie *Freedom Song*, has been helming documentaries like 1997's *Sarajevo Spring*. *The Sum of All Fears* has a lot riding on it — there's Ben Affleck taking on the role bequeathed to him by Harrison Ford (and Alec Baldwin); changing the direction of the franchise by making Jack Ryan young and green, but not taking him back in time before the other movies; and a terrifying plot, with intense terrorist action, in our post-Sept. 11 world.

"You could say there's an extreme terrorist act," he said during a recent interview at the Brown Palace Hotel, in Denver. Without giving away too much, the movie is a thriller with the chilling premise that people with the right connections and enough money could build an atomic bomb. Ben Affleck plays neophyte CIA agent Dr. Jack Ryan. "It's not a prequel, because that would have to take place in the 70s," Robinson said. The director believes viewers are intelligent enough to understand that it's "just the first episode in a new direction."

The 1991 Tom Clancy book on which the movie is based has Jack Ryan back in the field. Harrison Ford, first tapped to reprise the role he played in *Patriot Games* and *Clear and Present Danger*, felt like the character was at too high a level in the Agency to do field work. The revamped screenplay takes liberties with the novel, but keeps the essential story intact.

Robinson used his documentary experience to add a sense of urgency to many of the scenes in *Fears*. "I liked when a shot wasn't perfect," he said, referring to moments in his non-fiction films where the camera would have to move to find the subject. For some of the scenes in the National Airborne Command Center, where the President (James Cromwell) and his cabinet were arguing about whether to bomb the crap out of Russia, Robinson didn't give the actors much instruction in the way of blocking. "I wanted them to talk on

top of each other," he said, making the scene authentically chaotic. In fact the great Ron Rifkin (at once creepy and sympathetic as the head of SD6 in *Alias*), consistently had trouble getting into the chair he was supposed to use in the scene. At one point, totally out of character, he yelled, "I can't get this fucking chair to work!"

"I told him to keep that in," Robinson laughed. It's there, too, and makes you think Rifkin's Secretary of State has lost all poise. For all that's been said and written about Affleck, the scenes that really crackle are the ones with the grand old men of film and stage. When I asked about working in the same room with luminaries like Cromwell, Rifkin and Philip Baker Hall, Robinson added Bruce McGill and Alan Bates to the list.

Robinson was forthcoming with many technical details that I can't, in good conscience, share before you see the film. Suffice to say a representative from the Department of Defense provided lots of assistance in making the flick as realistic as possible. You'll get bits and pieces from the trailers, but plug your ears and sing the theme song to "Land of the Lost" ("Marshall, Will and Holly, on a routine expedition...") every time someone begins to talk about *Sum of All Fears* – the surprises are worth it.

# Eight Legged Freaks — Kari Wuhrer, David Arquette and Dean Devlin Interview

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~July 2002

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"This is really an experiment, I don't know how it's going to come out," said producer Dean Devlin at a recent roundtable interview for Eight Legged Freaks. "I don't know if it's going to work. The audience is going to vote really quickly, and we'll see. If it does work as a business model, I can see a whole lot of other films that I'd love to make, that don't warrant a \$100 million budget, but at \$30 to \$40 million, it's a really good business model."

Freaks, which honors the great, cheesy sci-fi flicks of the 50s, is a classic B-movie — the production was cheaply made, with a spanking-new director and second-tier actors (at least to the general movie-going public. Those of us in the know appreciate the multifaceted gifts of ex-Slider Kari Wuhrer). It was filmed in a mere 40 days, and cost \$10 million to shoot.

But the team that brought us such big-ass sci-fi extravaganzas as Godzilla and Independence Day fed 17 million bucks into some Freak-y special effects. "The trick is," said Devlin, "(to) make it funny, keep it scary, but not to compromise on the special effects. Can we take the effects of a \$100 million movie, and put them into a \$10 million picture — what happens then?"

What happens is you have a potential eight-legged hit on your hands. When a movie doesn't cost much more than \$30 million to make, fans of the aforementioned Wuhrer alone could make Eight Legged Freaks profitable.

When someone asked about the Mars Attacks debacle, Devlin ("a huge fan of Tim Burton") answered, "Mars Attacks was a very good movie. It was doing a B-movie in an A-movie picture. If Mars Attacks only cost \$30 million, it would have been seen as a gigantic success, financially."

The key to making Freaks work comes down to its balance between humor and terror. "It's not quite as silly as Gremlins, and not quite as dramatic as Tremors. It's somewhere in that family of films," said Devlin.

To capture that equipoise, Devlin and partner-in-summer-explosion-crime Roland Emmerich enlisted unknown Kiwi Ellory Elkayem to direct the flick. "I made a 12-minute, \$60,000 dollar film, in black and white, about a woman whose house is invaded by a spider that gets bigger and bigger," said Elkayem, who looks like he's almost old enough to buy a beer in the US. "It ended up in the Telluride Film Festival, and that was a big turning point. That's where I got my agent, and he got it out to various studios, and that's when it was seen by Roland and Dean. It was very, very good timing, because at that particular time, Roland and Dean had been talking about bringing back the old '50s giant insect movies."

"Ellory's film was really a love letter," said Devlin. "It was funny, but it made you scared." The producers hired screenwriter Jesse Alexander to work with Elkayem, and the two collaborated largely via e-mail to write a script.

Elkayem and Alexander struggled to write a screenplay that would capture the alchemy of screams and smiles. "I think, from the beginning we knew that people were going to be amused by the idea of big bugs," said Elkayem. "If we played it too straight, we were going to get into trouble. But if we played it too campy, people wouldn't be afraid of the spiders. So the balance was about creating these incredibly realistic things, and never making fun of them. And on the other hand, having these kind of crazy, wacky characters who respond in a very humorous way to the threat."

David Arquette was dying to do the film. "I've wanted to work with Dean since I met him on Stargate," he said. Lanky and looking like he'd just returned from an all-night bender (press junkets will do that to a person), Arquette was soft-spoken and patient when meeting with online press. He had a kind of young Chevy Chase thing going — his propensity for self-deprecating humor gave him a likeable vibe. "I read the script, and it's a kind of heroic action character, which I typically don't get to play. Rick Overton and Doug E. Doug were in the film, which meant I wouldn't have to carry the humor element of the picture. So I called up every connection I had at Warner Bros. I was, like, virtually begging for it. I said, 'Listen, you wouldn't let me try out for Scooby Doo—'" Arquette stopped, allowing the laughter to die down, "'So you're gonna have to let me do this.'"

"David made a very conscious effort not to be the kind of buffoon that he'd become famous for; the outrageous clown," said Devlin. "He really said to me from day one, 'I want to do something different. I want to play this as the romantic lead.' At first, we were scared of that, because this movie would need a great deal of humor. But to his credit, he never let

being the straight lead interfere with his timing. He was able to stay very funny, yet give us a performance like we'd never seen before."

Arquette wouldn't say that his wrestling experience had much impact on playing the role of prodigal son Chris McCormick, but, he said, "There is a certain amount of theatrical knowledge I gained from my wrestling experience. (Wrestlers) think on their toes, and there's a humor that comes out of their characters that's really subtle and really difficult to do, which I found out."

He definitely thought working with CGI spiders was easier than being on set with Muppets. "They're always sort of upstaging you. They're so funny, it's hard to compete," he said.

And, in case you're wondering, he did not rent any of Wuhrer's erotic thrillers to make sure there'd be chemistry between them (yes, I asked, causing an uproar). In fact, he had a tough time getting his answer out between laughs. "No, I didn't, actually," he said, shocked at the question. "But maybe I should have. Have you asked her that?" No, I didn't. I had enough trouble just asking basic questions without losing control of my jaw, which I couldn't seem to keep from hanging open as I sat next to her.

Kari (pronounced CAR-ee) Wuhrer actually looks better in person than on film. Granted, she seems a whole lot thinner, and maybe not as curvy as you'd expect, but, well, damn. Face it. You clicked on the link to this article because you want to read about her. Well, here's what you need to know: she's witty, she's articulate and she has a lot to say.

"Kari had the most difficult role in the picture," said Devlin. "On the one hand, she's a very modern female action hero. She's the one who's driving the action of the picture; she's the one with the shotgun. She's the sheriff; she's the tough character. On the other hand, she's the classic babe of the movie. To add a third dimension, she has to be a believable mother. And there were very few actors who could come in and do all three things."

"I was a little nervous about playing a mom," Wuhrer told us. "I think that was my biggest challenge. I don't have kids, let alone teenage kids, and I was just worried that the relationship was going to work. And thank god they got Scarlett Johansson to play my daughter. Because she's just so amazing, I saw so much of myself in that sassy 16-year-old."

Johansson, who went from working with the magnificent Coen brothers in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, to a star-making role in the critically acclaimed *Ghost World*, was pretty

prosaic about working with wonder Wuhrer. "She's closer to my age than most of the people who've played my mom," said Johansson. "She has one scene where she's very stern and I have one scene where I'm a little rebellious. And the rest of the film is all about the spiders. We always had a good time."

Working on Freaks was more intense than filming Anaconda, said Wuhrer, in spite of what other actors have said about making the movie in South America. "Those actors on Anaconda were PUSSIES!" Wuhrer laughed. "We had this big yacht... on the Rio Negro, where there's no bugs, because it's too alkaline. It was a little hot. The hotel we stayed in was on stilts in the middle of the jungle, and there were monkeys jumping out of trees and going through your purse, and I was like, 'Monkeys!' And Ice Cube was like, 'I'm not touching those damn monkeys.' I was so into the experience of it. And that's how I always choose the projects that I do. You to tell me I'm going to Prague, I'm going, baby. Or you tell me I'm going to the Amazon, yeah! The script could suck, and usually does, but I'm going."

What, you may ask (we did), would she get out of going to nowhere, Arizona, to film yet another low-budget flick? "I got to work with Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich," she said, a beatific smile on her face. "It's unbelievable. They're able to take the sci-fi genre and expand it and make it into a crossover market. I would bring (Dean Devlin) coffee on the set. I would light Roland Emmerich's cigarettes, rubbing sticks together."

Eight Legged Freaks could be a turning point for UGO's favorite sci-fi action chick. "Well, I've been mowing his lawn, and cleaning his pool, so I think maybe he'd have to consider me (for a sequel). I keep telling him I'm the new Will Smith."

So Eight Legged Freaks will have five days, from July 17 to the 21st, to prove its opening mettle. As Dean Devlin said, "I think if you willingly pay money to see a movie called Eight Legged Freaks, you get your money's worth."

# The Sum of All Fears

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~May 31, 2002

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Jack Ryan is dead. Long live Jack Ryan.

Here's the thing: Unlike James Bond, the film version of Jack Ryan doesn't have a recognizable, consistent way of behaving, speaking or interacting with other characters. He's not cool and competent, he has no discernable accent and he doesn't score with hot babes several times throughout the course of the story. So, the debate about whether Ben Affleck can play Clancy's serial spy is moot. Who cares, as long as the films are fun to watch and thought-provoking?

In the interest of disclosure, I should note that I grew to appreciate *The Sum of All Fears* after I sat down with its director, Phil Alden Robinson. It took me awhile to decide what to think about the flick, and he gave me some perspective. When I left the theater, I'd felt conflicted – the movie is technically well constructed, looks amazing and has some great performances, but the first hour runs a bit cold and distant. When I met Robinson, I thought he was a bright and unpretentious filmmaker, and that the movie was more complex than I'd initially given it credit for.

*The Sum of All Fears* covers a lot of ground – geopolitical, historical and emotional – and director Robinson juggles it all convincingly. When the movie's dramatic elements are at a peak, the story takes a dramatic detour to provide a very real sense of the scale of violence that's threatening the world's order. It's jarring, yet the story moves back to the main characters, and how they deal with it. That's the saving grace – it's almost too much, but Robinson pulls his punches just enough to keep the movie in the realm of entertainment. Then it's back to the action.

*The Sum of All Fears* stars Affleck as young Dr. Jack Ryan, desk jockey and neophyte CIA spook. When a new president emerges in Russia (Ciarán Hinds), Ryan is called in as a specialist, to provide background on the relatively unknown leader. When Ryan travels with an inspection team to a nuclear bomb-dismantling site in the former USSR, he notices that some scientists are missing. The Russians don't know that the nuclear physicists have been

**A-**

Story: A

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: A

spirited away, in order to build a weapon of mass destruction for a well-funded neo-Nazi group.

The predominantly male cast is driven and intense – the players are all at the top of their form, being manly and swinging their badges of authority around. The always-incredible Liev Schreiber is the real stand-out – he's cool, he's competent, and he can kick your butt without raising a sweat. Morgan Freeman does his customary "I know what I'm doing" saunter quietly – in fact, he's the only guy on the President's staff who never shouts and never gets worked up.

Oh yeah, and Affleck. He's fine. He rarely whines, and does a good job of being the smart newbie who's put in his place for speaking out of line, but learns the ropes along the way (there's a pun there, for those in the know about the Moshulu). I'd be happy to see him further the Jack Ryan franchise, especially if it means more movies with as much style and smarts as this one.

The whole movie is intelligent and authentic. It feels like it's plausible, which only makes the experience more imposing. At the same time, *The Sum of All Fears* is a taut political thriller, with well-directed action, amazing visuals and subtle nods to the spy genre. Long live Jack Ryan.

# Punch-Drunk Love

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~November 2002

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Even if you've never liked anything directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, you'll find yourself compelled to acknowledge his brilliance in casting Adam Sandler as his protagonist in Punch Drunk Love. I didn't love Boogie Nights and really enjoyed Magnolia. But PDL is a masterpiece — Anderson harnesses Sandler's buried rage to propel his movie along, only allowing it to break loose at opportune moments. It's like Robin Williams' early dramatic roles; the most successful ones, where the director ruled over his flights of fancy with an iron fist, forcing that energy to remain potential, rather than kinetic.

And there are dazzling moments where you're sure Sandler's anger is going to ignite the tension into a frightening explosion. But what happens, where Anderson shows his incredible voice and mastery of the medium, is that the violent emotions discharge where you wouldn't expect them, in sudden outbursts of sound or action that come from nowhere. They're startling, because Anderson uses cinematic sleight of hand to direct your attention elsewhere.

But that's not to say Sandler doesn't get a chance to fill the screen with explosive fury. It's his trademark; the vehicle that drives him in most of his work. What makes Punch Drunk Love so singular is the ways in which it's manifested. From subtle and overt tics and outbursts to how he walks or runs or interacts with others, Sandler — and Anderson — create an alchemy not fully realized since Scorsese and DeNiro started working together. Oh no, sorry. I'm not equating Sandler with DeNiro. I'm comparing the synergy — the way the directors' storytelling styles allow those specific actors to do what they do best and light up the screen. Anderson's love of sudden non-sequitur outbursts has marred his earlier work. But in tapping Sandler for this role, those random moments become powerful and relevant.

To give too much of a synopsis of Punch Drunk Love would be to do it a grave injustice. Sandler plays Barry Egan, a guy with his own business, too many sisters and dangerously

**A**

Story: A

Performances: A

Visual Appeal: A+

pent-up rage. When a mystifying woman (Emily Watson) drops into his life, he may have a shot at redemption.

Watson, as Lena, with her Sailor Moon eyes and preternatural smile, is the perfect foil to Sandler's constrained Barry. Her face is open and unmasked. Where Barry moves and acts as if he's uncomfortable in his own body, Lena seems to be at ease anywhere. At times sharp and polished or comfortable and ruffled, she emanates the wispy essence of a guardian angel who must be protected herself. The chemistry between the two actors makes the quirky movie outrageously romantic and unabashed in its sentimentality.

Punch Drunk Love is subversively funny. The laughs sneak up on you during long pans and delayed reaction shots. The movie capitalizes on Sandler's gift for physical humor without exploiting it. Pratfalls come out of nowhere. The dialogue isn't inherently funny, but comes out humorous nonetheless. And Anderson muses Philip Seymour Hoffman and Luiz Guzman bring their own brands of zaniness to the proceedings.

The percussive and eclectic soundtrack adds texture and rhythm to the film. And any movie that uses Shelley Duvall singing "He Needs Me" from the Popeye movie deserves extra props.

Anderson's signature style has matured into something you can really consume and enjoy, as the copouts he's used in the past to rescue himself from mopping his stories into corners are noticeably absent in Punch Drunk Love. What remains is non-stop pleasure; a completely fulfilling movie-going experience.

# XXX

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~August 2002

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Don't be fooled — XXX is not really the anti-James Bond. It's actually an old school 007 flick with a kick-ass new protagonist. From the opening scene, in which a tuxedoed super spy is tracked down because he's way overdressed, you know the filmmakers are trying to convince you that Bond is dead, and that Xander Cage is the new-style spy. What makes the movie funny (not intentionally, I think) is how much like a classic Bond flick it is — it plays more like *The Spy Who Loved Me* than an MTV-era action thriller. You have the mad talking villain bent on world domination, the icy hot babe, tons of exotic locales, an unflappable hero with his pithy one-liners, a wannabe-in-the-field Q character, and, get this: An old-fashioned soundtrack. Sure, the heavy metal pumps here and there but, mostly, we're subjected to generic, instrumental suspense music. But hey, I loved *The Man with the Golden Gun*, and some of the stunts are off the hook.

Xander Cage, AKA Triple X (Vin Diesel, of course) is a bad-boy extreme sports criminal type who's recruited to work for the NSA (I think) when they realize they need someone who doesn't smell like a spy. After some hilarious hazing/testing, he's sent to Prague to infiltrate a criminal syndicate called "Anarchy 99." With his "fuck you" attitude and tough-guy presence, Cage easily convinces the group's leader (Marton Csokas) that he's the shit. All that's left is to save the world and get the girl.

What's strange about the movie is that there's a ton that's cool and good and funny, but very little that's outrageously innovative. The film leaps out of the gate with some swooping camera work, killer transitions and thumping metal, but quickly slips into the screeching violins and spent clichés 007 wore out decades ago. XXX wants you to think it's a brash, cynical reworking of the spy classics, but it's not — it's homage.

That's not to say the movie isn't a lot of fun. Sure, it's flawed and derivative, but the explosions are supreme, and some of the stunts made me whoop out loud. Vin Diesel carries the joy of this adventure on his buff, tattooed shoulders. The dude is *The Coolest* actor in flicks right now. He has the great timing, hilarious expressions and hulking carriage

**B+**

Story: B+

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: B+

to pull off this character, and I look forward to many sequels. I mean, who else could actually look dangerous in a pimped-out fur coat?

Samuel L. Jackson plays X's scar-faced boss without breaking a sweat. Italian actress Asia Argento plays the Bond girl with a gleam of dangerous joy in her. She goes from being kind of sexy, in a dirty, slatternly way, to hot and wholesome by the end of the movie. Kiwi Marton Csokas seethes and roils as Yorgi — he's the classic Alan Rickman villain archetype: lanky and evil, but not physically imposing.

And the music. What the hell happened there? Why'd they give up on the heavy metal soundtrack? The score is so bad, it's distracting. There are some great lines in XXX, and some excellent stunts. The movie's a fun ride, but I'll bet Die Another Day will be just as enjoyable to watch.

# Eight Legged Freaks

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~July 2002

Dean Devlin said it best — if you know the name of this movie, and you still pay money to see it, you're not going to be disappointed. Eight Legged Freaks is a low-budget sci-fi horror comedy with kick-ass special effects. It's full of big laughs (and stinkers, too), some very spooky moments, and tons and tons of CGI spiders that look incredible. More an homage to the classic horror flicks of the '50s than a remake, it takes the components (monsters created from man's folly, people running and screaming) and brings them into the 21st century without losing the charm of the originals.

David Arquette plays Chris McCormack, drifting back into town after a long absence to reclaim his father's gold mines and the woman he loves (Oh yeah, Kari Wuhrer, finally getting to kick some ass again). He arrives just in time to help battle an infestation of immense spiders that have been feeding on toxic waste from a nearby spill.

The movie actually gets more frenetic and less scary as it progresses. When the spiders are still fairly hidden, the sneak-up-on-you factor is much higher. Once they're out en masse, making Gremlins-like sounds (thanks to the legendary Frank Welker) and participating in Gremlins-like shenanigans (moose mousse, anyone?), the movie is more about how the townspeople run, hide from and shoot at the fast-moving arachnids. When a cat disappears, its run-in with its foe starts out really scary, then turns funny. By the end of the sequence, the tension and humor are so well-balanced, you're not sure how to react.

One of my favorite parts of the movie is a motorcycle chase scene with fleet-footed leaping spiders. The action is brisk, both the bikes and the spiders are jumping, and it's kind of terrifying and kind of funny at the same time. It's one of the most inventive sequences in the flick. Once the surviving town members are ensconced in a failed mall, the movie becomes a jokey Aliens send-up, with lots of goo and scads of creepy critters.

Arquette wanders through the movie with a likeable vagueness that seems naturally slackerish. He's so low-key, he leaves room for the other actors to play and entertain. Kari

**B+**

Story: B

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: A

Wuhrer is the hot mama Sheriff Sam Parker, and serves up a great twist on the female protagonist, being both shapely and decisive, and never swooning or shrieking. Eileen Ryan, who sounds like she gargled with 6M HCl before each take, almost steals the show as McCormack's aunt.

The soundtrack is instrumental to the balance in tone in *Eight Legged Freaks*. Credit composer John Ottman for spooky "Itsy Bitsy Spider" undertones and the screaming violins that cue your conflicting emotional responses to the movie.

*Eight Legged Freaks* never loses its B-movie sensibility – except in the special effects department – which makes it surprisingly enjoyable to watch. There's no tangled web woven here, just a PG-13 creep show, with goofiness to spare.

# Die Another Day

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~November 22, 2002

I had to go back and read my XXX review before writing this one, because I wanted to be sure I hadn't made a total ass of myself. My last line in that review was, "The movie's a fun ride, but I'll bet Die Another Day will be just as enjoyable to watch." What the hell was I thinking? There's no substitute for a Bond movie. Period.

## A-

Story: B+

Performances: A

Visual Appeal: A

Die Another Day uses the same ingredients of every other 007 film, but toys with the narrative in a way that jolts our expectations without screwing up what we love about the franchise. It's kind of like, well, a new Taco Bell innovation. I don't mean this as a slight to the movie; I freaking love the Bell. But every menu item has essentially the same ingredients:

1. Tortilla 2. Iceberg lettuce sliced down to a thread-like consistency 3. Chopped translucent tomatoes 4. Shredded cheddar cheese 5. Meat 6. Maybe beans 7. And if you go Supreme, sour cream

But every once in awhile, the menu wizards come up with some new combination of the above ingredients, and somehow manage to make the thing (e.g., the Gordita) taste completely different from everything else on the menu.

That's what Die Another Day is like. It takes all of the components you know and love about James Bond flicks — intense opening gambits, inventive credits, photogenic locations, gasp-inducing Bond beauties, too many groaner innuendoes, evil henchmen with insane facial hardware, an early face-off with the bad guy, who just happens to be a megalomaniacal super villain with scads of capital, improbable stunts, gadgets up the wazoo — and produces a movie full of surprises and genuine, irony-free joy.

Brosnan's dangerous Bond makes Vin Diesel's Xander Cage look like a two-bit, mouth-breathing punk who lacks the synapses to tie his own shoes. Die Another Day is everything a knockoff like XXX wants to be. I liked XXX, and I'm a big fan of Vin Diesel. But you put these two movies up against each other, and XXX looks like your mom's pantyhose after a full evening of walking the streets.

Die Another Day isn't perfect – there are some pretty big holes in the narrative, where the setting changes and you say, "Um, what the hell just happened?" and Kiwi director Lee Tamahori relies waaay too much on slow motion. But that's just nitpicking. This is James freaking Bond we're talking about. The special effects are occasionally cheesy, but the action is relentless, and the movie's length (just over two hours) means that, just as you think you're nearing the climax of the film, you get bonus storytelling, babes and battles.

One of the coolest things about the flick is the way it pays homage to the classic Bond movies – from updated laser surgery to Halle Berry's Ursula Andress-like entrance, aficionados will pick up little inside jokes from start to finish.

On the subject of Halle Berry, damn. It's a given that Ms. Berry is one of the most attractive women on the face of the planet. But as a Bond girl, she took my breath away. Watch her walk up to Pierce Brosnan the first time he sees her. Watch the way her hips move. She's preternaturally sexy – almost to the point of being too frightening for my inner teenager. Yes, definitely create a spin-off movie of her character, Jinx. Please. Because beyond being so amazing to look at, she pulls off the secret agent shit exceedingly well.

Die Another Day delivers everything you'd expect from a next-generation Bond flick, while still managing to keep a handle on the style and self-assurance of the originals. Hell, yes.

# Analyze That

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~December 2002

I will always believe Harold Ramis is a genius. For writing, directing and acting in some of the greatest comedies of the last 30 years, Ramis deserves the benefit of the doubt. He's truly a great filmmaker. Unfortunately, his biggest stinkers tend to be the sequels, like *Ghostbusters II*. Maybe something's lost in the humor when he revisits the old characters, maybe the surprise of the first movies can't be translated to the second.

**B**

Story: B-

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: A

*Analyze That* isn't a dog, like *Caddyshack II*, but it's not nearly as hilarious or charismatic as *Analyze This*. It's much more bleak, much darker, and the actors don't seem as fresh and funny as they did in the first movie. The movie's certainly technically well-realized – the narrative flows fairly well, individual scenes are compelling and even touching at times. But the moments of farce seem forced, like they were stuck in when someone said, "Hey, wait a minute. I thought we were doing a comedy here."

*Analyze That* picks up several years after the events of *Analyze This*. Psychiatrist Ben Sobol (Billy Crystal) is at his father's funeral when he gets a call from former mob boss and patient Paul Vitti (Robert DeNiro), who has become a target in prison. Through the machinations of Vitti's shrewd planning and the FBI's inscrutable priorities, Vitti ends up under Doc Sobol's supervision, and must live with the shrink and his beleaguered wife (Lisa Kudrow). Of course Vitti has plans of his own.

What's interesting about the acting is that the dramatic scenes are more convincing and enjoyable than the comic ones. Freaking DeNiro is solid, mostly making fun of the dangerous characters he's played, but, damn, Bob, when are you going to make a movie of consequence again? American cinema needs you. Lisa Kudrow is sadly shrill and underused, never actually establishing a presence in the movie. And yet again, veteran Joe Viterelli steals every scene he's in. His Jelly provides the only sort of backbone to a movie that tends to wander and sway, never quite making up its mind.

Oh, and Aussie paisan Anthony LaPaglia is way too cool for this movie.

It's not that *Analyze That* is a bad film. It's just not very good. It doesn't have the wit and the enthusiasm, the off-beat humor and sparkling chemistry of the first one. It's just a tired retread, with some great actors, a truly talented director, and a story that doesn't go anywhere.

# The Core

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~April 2003

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Here's why *The Core* is better than *Armageddon*: The science exposition is really well-done, and very interesting. The dialogue is, at times, intelligent and funny. There's no cheesy love story and requisite tired ballad. Hilary Swank kicks ass. Aaron Eckhart pulls off being a slacker scientist with brains and balls. Gotta love Stanley Tucci playing against type. And *The Core* brazenly exploits every disaster movie cliché and has a sense of humor about it.

**B+**

Story: B+

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: B

Here's why it's not as good as *Armageddon*: Where's Steve Buscemi? The soundtrack is cool, but not cool enough. Product placement is even more ostentatious. Heroic attrition is brought to an insane level. It takes a loooong time to get rolling. The flaming fruit bit is lame. And, except for the harrowing Golden Gate Bridge scene, the FX are just plain silly.

So the Earth's molten core has stopped spinning, and only maverick geology prof Josh Keyes (Aaron Eckhart) has the know-how to make things right again. He'll need a crack team of professionals and eccentrics to burrow to the center of the world and set off nuclear charges before the protective magnetic field blanketing the Earth becomes too frayed to sustain life as we know it. In the meantime, bad shit is happening topside.

*The Core* is smart and funny most of the time, but never lets you forget its corny disaster flick roots. More languid than your average adventure movie, it simmers rather than seethes, and only comes to a rapid boil intermittently. One of the most enjoyable aspects of the film is the inspired casting. Indie thespians lend a highbrow tone to the proceedings — Bruce Greenwood and Eckhart, Tchéky Karyo and Hilary Swank play it up with the likes of Delroy Lindo, Alfre Woodard, Tucci and even D.J. Qualls and his preternatural schnoz. Everyone seems to be having fun in the flick, and that translates into a certain glee and goofiness on the screen.

Still. This is the time of year when the studios, in an act not unlike an Imperial Starship preparing for hyperspace, dump their trash before releasing the summer blockbusters. And I'll tell you, there's a lot of crap floating around out there this spring. *The Core* is a happy

surprise — it doesn't suck. If you're looking for a popcorn flick with a brain, *The Core* is a satisfying diversion until the big guns hit the big screen.

# X2: X-Men United

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~May 2003

I need to watch X-Men 2 again. The more I think about it, the more I find to like. I left the theater feeling mildly disappointed, though mostly satisfied with the experience. But the film keeps coming back to me – some of the smart twists, the answers that weren't obvious, the fun the actors were having and, whoa, the opening sequence.

Sure, X2 suffers from sequelitis. I mean, I want to see as many mutants as possible, but when you introduce a bolus of new talent, someone's going to get short-changed. Most of the characters are woefully underutilized, as if the filmmakers chose quantity over quality. Several plotlines scatter across X2, taking a long time to cohere; at one point, I counted four separate story threads. In trying to make the follow-up to the original brawnier, they've made it anemic in places, spread too thin to hold together.

The movie opens with a bravura sequence in which the mutant Nightcrawler (Alan Cumming doing his best with an Eastern European accent) enters the White House and goes after the president. His progress through the West Wing is inexorable, and the way he zips in and out of the picture, leaving tendrils of blue smoke, is probably the best thing about the entire film. The blue guy's easy access to the Oval Office freaks the shit out of the president, and he decides to give mutant-hating Gen. William Stryker (Brian Cox) the go-ahead for tough measures.

The actors are so comfy in their roles, watching them stretch their characters would have been really fun. The dazzling duo of Halle Berry (you know I have a thing for her) and Famke Janssen get to go off on their own jaunt, and though Berry doesn't get to do much, Janssen's Jean Grey ("Why don't I get a cool name?") does things that true X-philes will really appreciate. McKellen is sublime, as always, but the rest of the cast is kind of just there.

Then again, X2 is rich in nuance, dark and grim, funny at times and thrilling at others. It is art, no matter the budget and hype. Director Bryan Singer knows how to make flicks

## A-

Story: B

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: A

compelling and stylish. The dynamic camera movement and truly amazing special effects complement the aspirations for poignancy and deeper messages.

Overall, it's a movie that draws you in and keeps you involved, even if you wonder where it's going at times. It's not a roller-coaster ride like the first one, but it's no Batman Forever, either.

# The Matrix Reloaded

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~May 2003

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I wanted to write a super-short review of The Matrix Reloaded, where I would say something like, "The film kicks ass and that's all you need to know." But the movie does have issues, both good and cheesy, worthy of discussion.

**A-**

Story: B

Performances: A

Visual Appeal: A+

The good news is that Reloaded is every bit as magnificent to look at as its predecessor. Just as with the first Matrix, you'll find yourself blown away by special effects like you've never seen before. The fights are satisfying and full of wonder, and there are set pieces of action so visually rich, they have to be consumed several times to be fully digested.

But the story suffers from cinematic flatulence, as if the Wachowski brothers decided that the franchise needed to capture the mythic power of the first Star Wars trilogy. And that's where Reloaded goes wrong: Its earnest attempts at achieving something bigger, conceptually and philosophically, rather than merely being the most kick-ass sci-fi extravaganza ever, make it feel bloated and self-important. There's a painfully silly Blade-like subterranean tribal dance sequence that feels ridiculously out of context. The Matrix Reloaded spends eons on circular conversations about the idea of choice vs. fate, but doesn't really deliver any sort of cogent message. And when did Morpheus start talking like Mr. Smith?

At the same time, Reloaded introduces or fleshes out ideas that open entirely new vistas for the world the directors have created. Inside the Matrix, everything is part of a gigantic program, right? And smaller programs, or subroutines, are essential for every item, being, texture, reflection — anything the denizens of the fake world experience. There's a moment with a piece of pie that's truly spellbinding — not just in the wild way the idea is introduced into the story, but for the implications across the Matrix experience. The elasticity of the environment — the fact that programs can mutate or replicate or fix themselves or write new code — makes for endless possibilities in the mythos of the story. And that realization, that construct, is so much more interesting than the "lite" and mundane concept of fate vs. free will.

But, damn, the film is breathtaking to see. Holy shit, when Neo goes mano a mano a mano against Mr. Smith, Mr. Smith and Mr. Smith, the brilliance and beauty of the thing just grows and grows. The Wonder Twin bad guys are fun, and the chase scene on the highway is, well... DUUUUUDE.

Truly amazing is Lambert Wilson as Merovingian. He's funny, he's a bastard, and he does the French thing so well, you just want him to stay on the screen and talk awhile longer. He savors his lines as if he's drinking a 200-year-old Burgundy — smacking his lips and drawing out the pleasure.

You'll find lots to love in *The Matrix Reloaded*. It's fully satisfying in spite of its flaws, though it doesn't have the tight, streamlined feel of the first film. It doesn't matter, though, because I'm already counting down to *Revolutions*, and you will be, too.

# The Italian Job

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~May 2003

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It's funny — though ultra-thin and paper-light, *The Italian Job* delivers 97 percent satisfaction. Smart, slick, full of unexpected laughs and packed with a killer cast, this stylish (and formulaic, to be sure) caper movie is an early summer tonic.

**A-**

Story: B+

Performances: B+

Visual Appeal: A

The film dives right into the game, with Charlie Croker (Mark Wahlberg) leading a crew of thieves (including Donald Sutherland as the patriarch, Edward Norton, Jason Statham, Mos Def and the ever-cool Seth Green) on a technically stunning heist of a safe in Venice, Italy. The opening gambit immediately establishes the team as a finely-honed instrument of larceny, and the execution of the project is thrilling. When this cadre of crooks is double-crossed and their fortune in gold bars is swiped, they enlist the help of Stella Bridger, played by the always-enticing Charlize Theron, to get their booty back.

*The Italian Job* has the cool, tense pacing of another stylish remake, *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Director F. Gary Gray manages the relationships between the characters and keeps the tension high even when the family of felons is calmly implementing its escapades. Sweet camera movements, hilarious flashbacks and an easy comfort level between the actors make the film simple to swallow. The humor sneaks in, causes serious chuckles and outright laughs, but never actually steals away from the tenor of the whole package. And, damn, the soundtrack is eclectic and thumping, jazzy and punky and hip and happy.

By far, the best is Statham as Handsome Rob, who can drive anything, anywhere, very quickly. With his stubble and the low-rent English accent, he's the most fun to watch on the screen. Mos Def is freaking hilarious as the hearing-impaired explosion freak, and Seth Green, though playing to type as the tech guy, strays from his normally unruffled demeanor to be the toddler of the group. Watching him struggle with his motorcycle or whinge about Napster (one of the funniest digressions of the entire movie) makes for some decent snickers.

The story is too predictable at times, but the lack of serious twists makes *The Italian Job* comfort food for the film lover's soul. But, dude. The Mini has never, ever, looked cooler.

# 2 Fast 2 Furious

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~June 2003

Just because it's stupid doesn't mean 2 Fast 2 Furious isn't lots of fun. Sure, the plot is pure gas. Sure, most of the actors are so wooden, you wonder if they'll burst into flames. Sure, the dialogue is so laughable, you'll shake your head in derisive glee every time a character opens his or her mouth. But when the cars start their throaty growls, none of the other stuff actually matters. I was surprised how much I cared about the outcome of each race, even though I didn't give a crap about the rest of the film. Plus, there's always a place in my gut for an unapologetic dick flick.

Paul Walker returns to the role of Brian O'Conner, now an ex-LA cop. When the gawky speedster gets picked up after an ultra-fast street battle, he has no choice but to use his driving skills to help the local customs agents take down a bad guy (Cole Hauser – what the hell?). O'Conner recruits his best friend from home (Tyrese) to help.

OK, at first, I thought Paul Walker could act, but now I'm not so sure. He can't stop grinning like a little kid all through the film, and his most earnest attempts at emotional repartee are, well, embarrassing. It doesn't help that Tyrese has exponentially more personality than he does. Tyrese does his best with a lame script, stealing the movie from all of the other actors with his non-stop obsession over food and his character's inability to shut the hell up.

But none of that matters during the driving scenes. The contests are dynamic in a way I've never seen before. Director John Singleton manages to build tension into every race by showing each driver's face without seeming to cut between close-ups. It's the coolest fucking thing. You'll see Walker's cold stare as he pulls into a curve, then the camera will back out the window, move to the car behind him and close in on the sweating driver behind the wheel. It gives the race scenes a giddiness and flow that is both innovative and thrilling.

**C+**

Story: C

Performances: B-

Visual Appeal: A

I certainly left the movie wanting to drive fast, talk crap, get in a fight, and then eat rare steak with my hands while drinking a beer with the guy whose ears I just boxed. If 2 Fast had an R-rating, some breasts and at least one gratuitous sex scene, I might have wound up calling my best friend to bail me out of jail.

# Hollywood Homicide

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~June 2003

Eric: I'm on my way home from a screening. Eric's sister: Which one? Eric: Hollywood Homicide... gggghhh Eric's sister: How was it? Eric: Terrible. Eric's sister: What? It has Harrison Ford in it! Eric: I know. Scary. Eric's sister: The "old" deal? Eric: Yeah. It's so sad! Eric's sister: I was afraid of that.

## C+

Story: B

Performances: C+

Visual Appeal: B-

I'm embarrassed to admit that the 3-minute trailer for *Bad Boys 2* had me more thrilled than any 30 minutes of *Hollywood Homicide*. It had more humor, better explosions and vastly superior dialogue. It also had a joy to it totally absent in *Homicide*.

Look, I've always been a huge fan of Harrison Ford, but his latest outings have been pathetic. Between this and *K-11*, it's time for Indy to find a new agent, or get a little picky or something. He can do comedy, and his bemused expressions in *Hollywood Homicide* provide some of the shiny moments in the film. But it's creepy to see him acting old, and worse to watch Jack Ryan do *Blood Work* Clint Eastwood in *Sansabelts and loafers*. There's a sickening moment in which Ford's character puts on music in his apartment and dances with a drink in his hand. It's so pathetic, unconvincing and just plain wrong that I almost cried real tears for the memory of Han Solo.

Ford plays homicide Detective Joe Gavilan, beleaguered partner of newbie K.C. Calden (Josh Hartnett). Both cops have aspirations beyond their day jobs. Gavilan moonlights as an unsuccessful real estate agent, and Calden, who wants to quit dick work to become an actor, is a yoga instructor. They're assigned to find the murderers responsible for shooting up a rap club, and have to put up with their night jobs, conspiracies and each other along the way.

There are some moments of magic in the movie, though they're relatively rare. The secondary actors in the film provide 79 percent of the laughs. Goliath Keith David does his best growling as the detective's perplexed boss, veteran Martin Landau steals every scene he's in, and Dwight Yoakam and Isaiah Washington class things up with their villainous partnership. The best sequence in the entire movie: Gavilan and Calden in adjoining

interrogation rooms at Internal Affairs. Hilarious, goofy, joyful — so unlike the rest of the flick.

Damn. Harrison Ford needs to make fun movies again.

# Starsky and Hutch

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~March 2004

Ben and Owen probably ought to stop making movies together, because their on-screen chemistry can't possibly last forever. They're too darn funny — finding that elusive balance between annoying and hilarious, riffing on each other, and trading the role of "straight guy" back and forth seamlessly. They're a comedy team that manages to create moments of brilliance even in the worst of films. And Starsky and Hutch, with Wilson and Stiller, a host of surprises, and a loving homage to '70s style and mores, is a surprise wrapped up in avocado green hot pants.

The aforementioned duo play the iconic cops of Bay City, not as the competent team from the '70s TV show, but as a couple of wannabes who can't seem to make the right decisions. Snoop Dogg plays "urban informant" Huggy Bear with such reserve and style, he nearly steals the film. Vaughan's Reese Feldman character has come up with a way to grow genetically modified coca leaves that can be processed into a form of undetectable cocaine.

The movie isn't over-the-top ironic, like other recent nostalgic forays into TV land, and that's what makes it work. The art direction and costumes acknowledge that there was an inherent tackiness to '70s styles, but they also acknowledge that not everyone bought into it. Stiller's Disco Stu is all the more hilarious because he's a foil to Wilson's timeless cool. In fact, fine details — like the shaving razors, light fixtures, furniture, jewelry, even Free to Be ... You and Me, for Pete's sake! — place the film in its time without making overt fun of the era.

Between this and Old School, director Todd Phillips has proven that he can tread the fine line between clever and... stupid; the movie eschews gross humor for longer setups and bigger contextual laughs. It's almost subtle. And when it's not, those little explosions are all the more blindsiding in their delivery.

Not subtle (but welcome and hilarious) is Will Ferrell's cameo. I say we welcome the actor into the small pantheon of SNL alums whose presence alone on screen lifts films (if only for a moment or two) into something nearly transcendent.

**B+**

Story: B

Performances: A-

Visual Appeal: B+

Make no mistake: Starsky and Hutch is feather-light filmmaking. If it weren't for the comedic stylings of Wilson and Stiller and the mildly sardonic homage to the '70s, this would be just another funny buddy cop flick. There's nothing new about the movie — no innovative cinematography, no inventive plot. It's barely a parody. But it is quite funny.

# Spartan

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~March 2004

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Maybe it's time for director/screenwriter David Mamet to take a break. It's not that he lacks talent and energy, or that he couldn't write snappier dialogue half-conscious after a weeklong bender than most writers could over the course of an entire lifetime. And *Spartan* is lean, spare and stylish.

**B**

Story: B-

Performances: A

Visual Appeal: A

But it's also pretentious and too self-conscious, relying on signature Mamet-speak and his standard twisty devices to drive the story. It's nearly self-referential to the point of parody. I hate to beat it up too much — *Spartan* is a decent flick, and better than a lot of the crap that's in the theaters right now. But it plods along with no sense of humor, as if the auteur were swinging his balls without understanding the irony of the clanging sound they make.

*Spartan* tells the tale of Scott (Val Kilmer), a mysterious special ops badass, who's put to work hunting down the daughter of an important political figure. Seems she's been kidnapped into the white slavery trade, and Scott has the chops to bring her home. But things get complicated...

*Spartan* hates all of its characters, from the protagonist, to his cronies, to the many villains. It's not that the sudden violence of the flick is gratuitous, but that the body count is unsettling and unfair — grim for the sake of being grim, but adding nothing to the story.

As is standard for a Mamet composition, the viewer doesn't get anything for free. Everyone speaks in a kind of code that just barely tells you what's going on; Mamet doesn't talk down to his audience. It's cool, but almost too cool. Smart at times, but too aware of its own cleverness. *Spartan* is a noir spy flick with plot holes the size of Mamet's intellect (huge, which means he's too brainy for that kind of laziness).

Kilmer, as always, is likable, and his tough guy with a heart of gold mostly works. Mamet stalwart William H. Macy doesn't do anything particularly special, but he's always fun to watch.

Should you see it? Sure. Or at least put it on your Netflix queue when it's available. Spartan is entertaining and has moments of inspired filmmaking. But don't go expecting to see something innovative or outstanding. There was a time when saying something was a standard Mamet opus would be, at the very least, a near compliment. Just not this time.

REVIEW

# Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / ~March 2004

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind feels like a return to screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's Being John Malkovich universe. The vaguely depressing set design, the muted colors and rawness of the cinematography and the characters' perceptions combine to bring the viewer back to Kaufman's unsettling and hilarious mindscape.

Although Eternal Sunshine's plot isn't particularly unpredictable, the narrative certainly is. By turns funny, touching and moderately disorienting, Sunshine is a love story wrapped up in a riddle performed in the Theatre of the Absurd. It's awesome.

Jim Carrey turns in a muted and convincing performance as Joel, a closed-up, locked down kind of guy who's uncomfortable in every situation. My guess is that he's channeling Charlie Kaufman himself, because he bears a striking resemblance to Nicholas Cage's portrayal of the writer in Adaptation. When Joel learns that his girlfriend of two years, manic and unhinged Clementine (Kate Winslet), has had all traces of him wiped from her mind at a clinic specializing in selective memory excision, he decides to reciprocate. What follows is an astounding, funny and moving excursion — drifting between what's going on inside Joel's brain and the drama unfolding between the employees of the clinic (Elijah Wood, Mark Ruffalo, Kirsten Dunst and Tom Wilkinson; a brilliant ensemble of lowlifes and slackers).

Carrey and Winslet have an ineffable chemistry; her wild ying to his uptight yang, and they bring warmth and romance into even the most bizarre moments (the kitchen sink is a favorite of mine). Carrey's bursts of energy work so well because he's so internalized most of the time. It's his most subtle and best-acted role to date; more proof of a depth of talent that is only just being recognized. And Winslet is gorgeous, no matter the color of her hair from scene to scene. She's angry and dangerous, but when her face softens, there's a vulnerability that's almost heartbreaking.

A-

Story: B+

Performances: A

Visual Appeal: A

The dialogue provides non-stop joy. It's intelligent and ironic, funny in context rather than in rhythm. And with the help of camera work that's sometimes fidgety, sometimes sweeping, and a jaunty, comical score, director Michel Gondry succeeds in setting a pace and tone that allow the viewer to feel swept along with the story.

Is that a good thing? Well, the movie is pretty wonderful. But, at the same time, I can't help but feel just a little disappointed in the fact that I didn't leave trying to untwist or unravel what I'd seen. It's meta for the masses, just not quite meta enough for me. The movie looks into the deep end, but stays safely in the kiddie pool.

Still, it's a film that'll stick with you for a while.

# Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

By Eric S. Elkins / UGO.com / June 2004

There's an ambient sadness to Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, and it brings a richness and depth to a franchise that, though entertaining, has carried the artlessness of the books to the big screen. Director Alfonso Cuarón has supplanted Chris Columbus's wide-eyed and slavish adaptation of J.K. Rowling's books with something darker and more akin to a Roald Dahl tale.

**B+**

Story: B+

Performances: B

Visual Appeal: A

You never forget in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* that young Harry is an orphan — truly alone in the world — and even his family of choice (the Weasleys and his classmates) can't fill the hole in his heart where his parents used to be. From the second he appears on the screen, it's obvious that Harry is reaching puberty, and there's no one to help him get through it. He's hormonal and unhinged, he feels guilty and alone, and then he hears that the guy who sold out his parents and was convicted of murder has escaped from prison and may be out to kill him.

It's Year Three at Hogwarts for young Potter and his cronies, and the big old castle is no longer the brightly lit, magical wonderland it once was. It's a forbidding place, full of dangers both human (Draco Malfoy is big and ugly now) and natural (that Whomping Willow is a lawsuit with leaves). And with the notorious Sirius Black on the loose (Gary Oldman), the Dementors, terrifying wraiths who guard Azkaban prison, lurk along the perimeter of the grounds in case he makes an appearance.

The movie looks washed out and grainy most of the time, and it adds to a sense of exhaustion, as if Harry has just had it with the crap surrounding his life. He's desperate for a father figure — someone who'll show him the path towards manhood. He turns to the latest Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, Professor Lupin (David Thewlis is back!), who seems rather meek, but believes in the young wizard.

The movie never slides all the way into Harry's dark depression, because it's packed full of throwaway gags and interstitials that bring a sense of humor and spark to the film. The first

two movies were relentlessly plot-heavy, never pausing long enough to take joy in the framework of the world Rowling created. But *The Prisoner of Azkaban* revels in its context.

And the adult cast is a who's who of English talent. Potter veterans Alan Rickman, Maggie Smith and the aforementioned Coltrane are joined by newcomers Thewlis, Oldman, Gambon and Emma Thompson. Thewlis, for once NOT playing a mincing villain with a pendant lip, brings warmth to his Professor Lupin, and Thompson disappears into the silly, histrionic Professor Trelawny.

It's a good thing the adult cast is so talent-heavy because, unfortunately, even with the first two Harry Potter flicks under their belts, the kids still can't act. In fact, Daniel Radcliffe (Harry) may actually be worse in this one, because he's asked to do so much more. There's a moment where he's apparently crying, but when you finally see his face, there's nothing convincing about his sadness or apparent rage. It's a mean thing to say, but the acting is still subpar.

Luckily, everything else works well. The sets are dramatic and amazing, and the CG additions to just about every scene make the movie more dimensional and magical. And the score is thrilling, especially the ticking clock segment towards the end of the film.

Cuaron has taken a franchise already recognized as a family classic and infused it with art and density. Although *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is about kids, it's not just for them – it gleefully re-imagines Hogwarts as an intrinsically menacing place while capturing the razor sadness and inherent loneliness of coming of age. It's like *Where the Red Fern Grows* with wands.