Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 13 April 2004 18:00

THE ALAMO

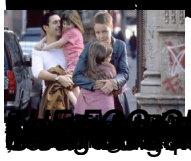
The Alamo is surprisingly not-bad. John Lee Hancock's long-delayed drama is by no means a great movie, but it's a pretty darned good audience movie, a middlebrow weeper like A *Beautiful Mind* or *Titanic* that, despite its flaws (and against your better judgment), you can find yourself really falling for.

This latest screen re-telling of the tragic siege in Texas is almost doggedly earnest as it introduces our heroes – Davy Crockett (Billy Bob Thornton), Sam Houston (Dennis Quaid), Jim Bowie (Jason Patric), and William Travis (Patrick Wilson) – and establishes their relationships; listening to the serviceable, uninspired dialogue (occasionally peppered with sitcom-cute punchlines) during the film's first 20 minutes, you might be fearing the worst. Yet, almost miraculously, director Hancock and company manage to transcend the banality of the script. With the exception of a rare ghastly musical score by Carter Burwell, the design of the film is outstanding, with special props going to Dean Semler for his marvelous cinematography, and Hancock comes through with terrifically affecting moments throughout; by establishing a tone of escalating hopelessness as the final attack draws near, Hancock moves us with touching simplicity.

As for the cast, Hancock's actors might know they're working with second-rate material, but damned if they're not giving that material their all. Thornton employs his laconic drawl and aw-shucks grin to endearing effect, which makes Crockett's take-charge heroism all the more satisfying; the one bum note in Thornton's portrayal comes when, leaning near a dying officer in the heat of battle, he's forced to say, "I'm really sorry about all of this." *Nobody* could make that line work. (Hancock edited hours from the film, yet somehow this nugget survived the final cut?) Quaid's Sam Houston is a ripe caricature, just over-the-top enough for Houston to appear larger-than-life, and Patric's boozy anger matches up nicely with Wilson's (intentional) dullness; the actors make you buy their whole clichéd mutual-hatred-turning-into-mutual-respect relationship. Except for Emilio Echevarria, whose Santa Anna has been directed as a barking sadist from a James Bond movie, the entire cast acquits itself admirably; if this group actually had some *decent* lines to deliver, *The Alamo*

might have really been something. Nevertheless, it's by no means the debacle the advance buzz suggested.
The Alamo
is simplistic, yes. Obvious, yes. But does it work? Believe it or not ... yes.

HELLBOY

I'm a little surprised by the critical raves for *Hellboy*. Sure, writer-director Guillermo del Toro gives the proceedings visual style to spare – the filmmaker seems to have a real affinity for oozing, slithery grossness – but what, in the name of heaven, is going
on
in this movie? I understood that Hellboy came into being from a black hole, or something, that the Nazis created when they were employing the powers of Lucifer, or someone, as a weapon during World War II and ... oh, screw it, let's not even pretend I understood
that
. Fun though the film's effects are, I found
Hellboy
incoherent and annoyingly derivative; isn't Hellboy really just Wolverine in Satanic garb? (He even smokes a stogie.) In the title role, Ron Perlman is fine, I suppose, but his line readings don't have any surprise – using his old
Beauty & The Beast
cadences, Perlman is lovably gruff, just as you imagine he'll be – and when he shares scenes with the deathly dull Selma Blair the movie grinds to a complete halt. Everything at the heart of the movie is generic and rote, so it makes perfect sense that del Toro spends so much time whipping your senses into a frenzy;
Hellboy
is loud and visually audacious, and I
still
had a hard time keeping my eyes open.

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