X-MEN: THE LAST STAND

In his X-Men films of 2000 and 2003, Bryan Singer managed a marvelous blend of gravitas, insouciance, and pure ass-kicking spectacle, and the highest praise I can give *X-Men: The Last Stand* is that director Brett Ratner, nearly scene for scene, fools you into thinking that Singer helmed this one as well. For a director with an indistinct visual style, there are far worse ways to go than aping the visual style of others, and in the case of *The Last Stand*, Ratner’s channeling of Singer’s tone seems less unimaginative than duly reverent, and even inspiring; you can feel Ratner working diligently to not louse up Singer’s vision. And he hasn’t. This third, and purportedly final, entry in the mutant-superhero saga is a spectacular entertainment, and if you were worried that Ratner’s participation would guarantee acceptable effects but little in the way of personality, your fears will prove unfounded – it’s a more-than-satisfying wrap-up to the trilogy.

Those of us who crave ambiguity in movies – who get easily bored with simplistic, black-or-white generalizations – tend to have a low tolerance for Hollywood action blockbusters. But the X-Men films have proven wonderfully subversive. Not only do our heroes feel no crises of conscience in permanently eliminating their enemies, but the mutant über-villains prove to be surprisingly empathetic figures; it’s hard to root against a character revealed to be a Holocaust survivor. (Ian McKellen brings to Magneto the full weight of his character’s youthful experiences in war-torn Poland.) You don’t necessarily root for the “bad guys” to triumph in the X-Men films, but you certainly understand why they want to, and throughout the films, your allegiances to Professor Xavier (Patrick Stewart), Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), and the other “good guys” are tempered with dread; the heroic mutants themselves are almost sure they’re doing the right thing. What has resulted are works that prove to be deeply engrossing – even moving – without scrimping on the comic-book fun.

The lines of good and evil are clearly drawn here, but those lines are elusive and shifting, and *The Last Stand*’s story makes the action resonate far beyond the clever effects. An “antidote” to the mutant gene has been found in the body of a grave teenage boy (played, inevitably, by Cameron Bright), and as word of a cure reaches the public, the mutants themselves react – Professor Xavier faces the threat to his mutant-training academy with diplomatic trepidation, aware of its

horrific implications but hopeful that it might also be a step toward tolerance; Rogue (Anna Paquin) sees it – as do countless other mutants – as salvation, an end to her life spent without physical contact; Magneto, as his character would, believes the antidote to be a prelude toward mutant extinction, and organizes forces intent on destroying its host. *X-Men: The Last Stand* turns this ideological debate into a full-scale war between the mutant factions, and does so with an emotional fervor that complements the generally terrific CGI effects.

You may find yourself fearing the worst – that Ratner will make *The Last Stand* a serviceable action flick without a soul – in the first post-credits sequence, with the valiant X-Men involved in a generic, explosion-filled battle wherein Wolverine makes bum jokes and laments the destruction of his last cigar. But Ratner and the screenwriters (Simon Kinberg and Zak Penn) are – and remain – one step ahead of us, turning the jokiness *itself* into a joke, and it's not the last time *The Last Stand* proves smarter than we may be expecting.

There's practically no end to the movie's good ideas. Some are throwaway, such as the shot of a mutant student dictating classroom notes while gliding her hand over her notebook, the lecture magically materializing on paper. Some are grand, as when Magneto redirects the positioning of the Golden Gate Bridge (a superb effect) toward Alcatraz. Some are almost heartbreakingly suggestive; a pubescent Angel (played as an adult by Ben Foster), ashamed of being a mutant, tries to rid himself of his wings by locking himself in a bathroom with scissors and a grater. And some, like the recasting of Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) as a godlike figure of pure, mutant abandon, expand the scope of the plotting with startling inventiveness. It's not a faultless script (the flat dialogue doesn't possess the richness of the movie's themes), but it's a fantastic *blueprint* of a script, and the actors – especially McKellen, Jackman, Janssen, Foster, and Aaron Stanford, with his insinuating, heartless stare – provide more than enough depth to compensate for the frequent banality of their lines.

Is it possible I'm overpraising the movie because of my enormous affection for Singer's first two installments? Am I just thrilled that Ratner's film doesn't completely suck? Perhaps. (*The Last Stand* has hardly been the beneficiary of much critical goodwill.) But, for my money, the dynamic action set-pieces here blend perfectly with the unforced sincerity of the characterizations, and while Ratner doesn't display the nearly poetic grace that Singer often did, he fakes it rather beautifully; the Wolverine-Cyclops-Jean Grey triangle has a heart-wrenching payoff, and Magneto's final comeuppance is achingly fine. (I'll admit to shedding a tear or two during the film on more than one occasion.) For a film about mutants,

X-Men: The Last Stand
is one of the year’s most unexpectedly human entertainments.

SEE NO EVIL

Magneto isn’t the only villainous mutant you might find yourself siding with these days. In the laughably inept horror flick *See No Evil*, a group of youths, fresh from time spent in juvenile detention, are sent to clean up a dilapidated hotel, and find themselves falling prey to a monstrous head-case with a hook. The pro wrestler Kane plays the killer, and it’s fair to say that he’s the only likeable figure in the movie – the assembled victims are so hatefully obnoxious, and the film’s scares are so retrograde in their unimaginative brutality, that my only regret in the film is that Kane didn’t impose his murderous charms on the film’s writer and director, too.

OVER THE HEDGE

Over the Hedge is a perfectly pleasant talking-animals affair – not as inspired as *Madagascar*, wittier than
The Wild
– but the plotting is surprisingly sharp, and every once in a while this CGI-animated work will wow you with a comedic flourish that makes you want to applaud. There’s a sensational bit involving the eardrum-shattering power of THX sound, a perfectly placed
Streetcar Named Desire
mini-parody, and the very idea of William Shatner voicing a hambone,
prone-to-elongated-death-scenes possum would be amusement enough if Shatner’s hysterical vocal performance – complete with pause-heavy, Captain Kirk cadences – didn’t make the joke

positively explode. Best of all,
Over the Hedge
gives us Steve Carell as a jittery chipmunk, whose climactic introduction to caffeine provides one of the best visual gags I’ve ever seen in an animated feature – after this hyper-active rodent took a gulp of soda, it took me about 10 seconds to figure out where the routine was going, and once I did, I think I laughed for the next 10 minutes.