

Pitfall Wizard: "Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 18 July 2007 02:43

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HARRY POTTER & THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

I have no idea whether Alan Rickman, who portrays the impenetrable, vaguely sinister wizard Severus Snape in the Harry Potter films, realized that the *Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix* movie would hit screens 10 days before the release of J.K. Rowling's seventh (and purportedly final) Potter book. But Rickman's portrayal seems so shrewdly tied in to readers' hunger for a new installment - and their passionate "Is Snape a villain or *isn't* he?" debate - that, with very little screen time to do it in, he practically emerges as the film's star.

Speaking with insinuating mellifluousness (he appears to be swallowing his words as he utters them) and eying Harry with half-bored, half-rapt attention, Rickman is spectacularly enigmatic, and his readings are so loaded with comic malevolence that he can answer a question with a hesitant "Yes ..." and leave you absolutely clueless as to whether Snape meant "yes" or "no." It's a performance of masterful subtlety, and the film's opening-day audience - most of whom, judging by the fervor of their laughter and applause, were devoted Potter-philes - appeared to relish every moment of it. (Not that there was much they *didn't* relish; the crowd applauded before, during, and after the screening.)

Yet as someone who hasn't read a word of Rowling, I was especially grateful for Rickman's presence because he appeared to be one of the few elements of *Order of the Phoenix* designe

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d to appeal to both the author's devotees and a
film
audience in equal measure.

The Harry Potter movies are so chockablock with activity and characters, and are so intricately designed, that they all but guarantee at least a *pretty* good time. With the exception of Alfonso Cuarón's singular
Harry Potter & the
Prisoner of Azkaban

though, I've never had anything
more

than a pretty good time. It's not that the Potter movies are alienating; you can follow the plotlines and character motivations easily enough, and they don't seem overrun with in-jokes for Rowling fans. Yet the figures and storyline twists that appear to mean the world to the books' admirers can't have the same impact on the rest of us, and from this Muggle's perspective, I felt that

Order of the Phoenix -

directed by David Yates, written by Michael Goldenberg - was too often designed
solely

for Rowling's readers.

Nothing, of course, can destroy the magical quite like literal-mindedness, yet film is a literal medium, and too much of this fifth installment left me scratching my head. Near the beginning, Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) is reprimanded - and nearly expelled - for practicing his wizardry in front of a civilian. But two scenes later, his friends whisk him away to Hogwarts on broomsticks, at one point swooping directly in front of a boatload of cruise-ship passengers. Wouldn't that constitute the misuse of magical powers in front of the citizenry? When the Weasley twins (James and Oliver Phelps) retaliate against the officious Dolores Umbridge (Imelda Staunton) by setting off fireworks during the O.W.L. exam, why aren't there repercussions for the disruption? Aren't these exams, you know, *important*?

Perhaps these narrative considerations are dealt with in the book, but all throughout *Order of the Phoenix*

, I felt like I needed an interpreter to explain why the audience was reacting with such delight to such puzzling, and even pedestrian, scenes. Why is the crowd cackling at the ever-grotesque over-acting of Richard Griffiths and Fiona Shaw, who play Harry's uncle and aunt? Are the characters somehow less revolting in the books? Are the sequences of the students training for "Dumbledore's Army" as much of a slog in the novel as they are here? Is the demise of Sirius Black (Gary Oldman) foretold with as much obviousness? Is Umbridge's eventual comeuppance as disappointing? (This tough cookie, so sharp throughout the film, gets rather easily fooled in the final reel.)

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And I'm sorry, but are the Hogwarts students as devoid of personality as a Rowling virgin might be led to believe? Daniel Radcliffe has turned into a fine, polished young actor, and Evanna Lynch, as the eccentric waif Luna Lovegood, has a sweetly ethereal creepiness. The others, however, are all pretty interchangeable (and disposable), and that includes Emma Watson's Hermione and Rupert Grint's Ron; five films in, and these two are still all-too-aware of the camera's presence. (Watson and Grint loosen up when they smile, but considering the material, that doesn't happen often.)

Cuarón's endeavor aside, the Harry Potter films seem to me very strange: They're *superfluous* blockbusters. Every Potter fan I know says the books are better than the movies, but no one seems

bothered

by that. (Their love for Rowling's prose bleeds over into the movies themselves.) When I tell people I haven't really cared for the film series - the dutiful effects that lack lyricism, the tonal vacillations between childishness and portentousness, the waste of so many gifted British thespians - they ask,

every time

, if I've read the books. I say no, and most of them reply "

Oh

... ." with a piteous head-tilt that implies, "No

wonder

you haven't enjoyed them."

Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix

will likely enthrall the devoted, but it was really only Alan Rickman's performance that made me think that, by not joining J.K. Rowling's legion of fans, I was actually

missing

something.