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MONSTERS VS. ALIENS

After a quick, manic prelude that effectively sets the tone for this quick, manic movie, Dreamworks' animated *Monsters Vs. Aliens* offers what is doubtless the most promising opening credit of the year, wrapping up its recognition of voice-over actors with: " ... and Stephen Colbert as the President." *All* right*!*, you think.
Success at last!

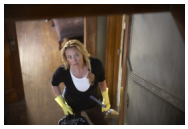
Yet almost before you can adequately take in the comic possibilities inherent in this priceless bit of casting, Colbert's Prez makes his first appearance, and reveals himself to be ... only sorta kinda funny. Greeting a destructive alien spacecraft with a Vulcan salute and a Casio keyboard, the President initially attempts to make contact with Earth's visitors through the five-note theme from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which he promptly screws up (sorta funny), and then with *Beverly Hills Cop*'s "Axel F" anthem (kinda funny). Later in the film, he'll nearly, accidentally launch nuclear missiles, and shriek like a woman, and decree Danger Threat Level Brown "because I have to change my pants," and then, with a half hour to go, he'll vanish completely - and Dreamworks' latest CGI outing turns out to be just like Colbert's character: deeply goofy, fitfully funny, and gone before you know it. (The movie runs a swift 90 minutes.)

It's hard to imagine a title more on-the-nose than *Monsters Vs. Aliens*, and the film earns points, I guess, for giving audiences exactly what they expect. There's a group of monsters, including the skyscraper-sized Susan (voiced by Reese Witherspoon), the mad scientist Dr. Cockroach (Hugh Laurie), the toothy Missing Link (Will Arnett), the turquoise-blue-hued "indestructible gelatinous mass" B.O.B. (Seth Rogen), and the voiceless, fuzzy, 350-foot grub Insectosaurus. There's a bunch of aliens, led by the literally four-eyed Gallaxhar, who boasts the tentacles of an octopus and the voice of Rainn Wilson. Then they all fight. And while I'd like to tell you there's more to *Monsters Vs. Aliens*

than that, there isn't, really; you could easily fit both its plot synopsis and its subplot synopses on a cocktail napkin, and likely still have room left over for a transcription of all the jokes that are legitimately hilarious.

Still, as wholly meaningless, throwaway kiddie entertainments go, this one isn't bad. Directors Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon deliver impressive sci-fi scope - gigantic monsters and spaceships keep getting dwarfed by even *more* gigantic monsters and spaceships - and the vibrant, colorful animation is rather extraordinary throughout; my weekend movie schedule found me viewing the film in 2D rather than 3D, yet I can't say I noticed any loss of grandeur. And yes, there are lame gags and obvious puns aplenty - Kiefer Sutherland's barking General is unimaginatively named W.R. Monger - but at least they're delivered with cheerful affability, and the casting provides such a plethora of in-joke connections that adults can have a fine time just associating one famous voice with another. (Wilson's
The Office
co-star John Krasinski shares a scene with Renée Zellweger, who he romanced in
Leatherheads
; Rogen's blob converses with the actor's frequent screen partner Paul Rudd; Gallaxhar's flirtatious computer is voiced by Will Arnett's real-life wife Amy Poehler ... .)
Monsters Vs. Aliens
may not make you laugh all that often, but it's hard to be terribly disappointed by a nearly constant smile.

THE HAUNTING IN CONNECTICUT



If you saw the cineplex trailer for *The Haunting in Connecticut* - and it would've been tough *not* to, as it seemed to precede every film released since the first of the year - you might remember how it ended, with a frenzied series of flickering lights and supernatural images and shrieking apparitions leading to the ultimate horror of ...
an out-of-tune piano
! The preview's atonal plinky-plunk music was so ingrained in memory by the time I saw this haunted-house opus that I was shocked, albeit not upset, to discover that the movie actually features no piano, or piano music, whatsoever. Of course, you can't say
The Haunting in Connecticut

necessarily needed it; it's plenty out-of-tune all on its own.

For a while, though, director Peter Cornwell almost manages to convince you otherwise. The plot, which concerns a teenage cancer patient (the touching Kyle Gallner) spooked by the spectral goings-on in his family's mortuary-turned-fixer-upper, is your standard scare-flick silliness, yet for more than half its length it's presented with disarming naturalism and an eerie sense of foreboding, and Cornwell guides his actors to effectively tough-minded performances. (Elias Koteas, as a helpful priest, is sensationally good, and Virginia Madsen, with that husky voice that suggests a blessed sanity, is practically a genre godsend.) But as usual in paranormal, "based on a true story" creep-outs of this type, the more events are "explained," the less sense they make, and *The Haunting in Connecticut*'s final reels digress into a noisy and borderline laughable collection of crummy CGI effects, bizarre continuity lapses (day turns to night in record time), ear-splitting bangs and bumps, and screeching violins. By the finale, I felt so assaulted by the din that I would've
killed
for an out-of-tune piano.