Written by Mike Schulz
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***TOY STORY 3***

Sitting in the packed auditorium for a matinée screening of *Toy Story 3*, I was unsurprised to find that one of my fellow audience members was an infant who cried almost throughout the entire film. I would've been more irritated by the distraction if, for hefty chunks of the movie's opening and closing reels, I wasn't such a weepy infant myself.

But there you have it: This third (and likely final) of Pixar's animated adventures featuring Woody, Buzz Lightyear, and their plaything companions is a deeply poignant and moving experience, so much of one that the film also being funny, exciting, and unfailingly clever is practically beside the point.

I say this not only with admiration, but a huge sigh of relief. Did anyone else think that *Toy Story 3*'s theatrical trailer made the movie look borderline awful? Loud, manic, and boasting groaner punchlines ("I don't think those were Lincoln Logs ... ."), jokey pop-culture winks (Barbie and Ken locking eyes to "Dream Weaver"), and the now-dreaded threat of a 3D presentation, the preview had me fearing the worst; all that was missing, it seemed, was a cameo by Shrek. Yet the movie is actually superb, a richly textured and fiercely imaginative work that can sit, if not next to, at least near the absolute finest of Pixar's feature-length offerings. (And if you, too, are over the "novelty" and added expense of 3D eyewear, just go the route I did and catch the film in good ol' 2D. I can't imagine anyone leaving feeling gypped.)

It won't take long to realize that, under Lee Unkrich's direction, you're in very good, very safe hands, as *Toy Story 3* begins with a thrillingly entertaining action sequence that re-introduces us to our plastic heroes and their memorable catchphrases, and quickly launches into a strong narrative that finds the gang relocated to an initially wondrous, eventually menacing day-care center. Suffusing all of the movie'

s enjoyable and witty activity, though, is a heartbreaking sadness
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with owner Andy heading off for college, the toys are forced into acknowledging their obsolescence
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and it
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s to the immense credit of Unkrich and his staggeringly gifted collaborators that the melancholy never overwhelms this follow-up
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s spirited sense of fun. If you love the
*Toy Story*
movies as I do, you may find it embarrassingly easy to get choked up here; the opening home-movie montage, underscored (naturally) to Randy Newman
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s
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You
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ve Got a Friend in Me,
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climaxes with the haunting acceptance of a childhood come and gone, and the film
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s final 10 minutes are about as touching as the first 10 minutes of Pixar
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*Up*
. But
*Toy Story 3*
never forgets that this animated series has always been about
*joy*
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the joy of imagination, of play, of love for inanimate objects that, as kids, we fill with personality. And it
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s that profound, glorious sense of happiness that makes the movie, like its predecessors, so resonant. You may leave with tears staining your cheeks, but you
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ll likely be grinning as you wipe them away.

While Michael Arndt's dialogue is lacking the laugh-out-loud wit of the first two *Toy Story*s, his script delivers so many exceptionally witty
*visual*
gags that you

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ll barely notice: Mr. Potato Head (the vibrantly cranky Don Rickles) reconfigured as a walking, talking, soft-shell taco; the Ken doll (an incredibly welcome Michael Keaton) modeling his fantastically gaudy wardrobe of period duds. And it should go without saying that the readings by the film
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s vocal cast
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a peerless ensemble that includes Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Wallace Shawn, John Ratzenberger, Estelle Harris, Jodi Benson, and new recruits Ned Beatty, Timothy Dalton, Jeff Garlin, Whoopi Goldberg, and Bonnie Hunt
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provide constant delight even when the lines themselves are only moderately amusing.

But the movie, which also features a series of brilliantly constructed cliffhangers that rival anything Spielberg pulled off in the Indiana Jones franchise, is never better than when melding its comedy and its sentiment, which it does on an almost shockingly regular basis. It's arguable as to whether you
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ll well up or roar upon the first sight of Andy
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s formerly manic pooch Buster
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now so tired and chubby that he can barely waddle from one room to the next without collapsing
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but both reactions are merited, and offer a level of pleasure that feels almost cleansing. I was praying for
*Toy Story 3*
to be moderately satisfying, and to not tarnish our enormously fond feelings for
*Toy Story*
and its first sequel; in other words, I was hoping that it would be the animated equivalent of
*The Godfather: Part III*
. It turns out to be more like the animated equivalent of
*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*
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