



CARS 2

Judging by his voice, vocabulary, and the intensity with which he occasionally kicked the back of my theater seat, I’m guessing that the kid sitting behind me at *Cars 2* was about three or four. He would also, for the folks at Pixar and Disney, be perhaps the ideal critic to supply a pull-quote for the animated comedy’s TV and print ads, because during the screening’s first 20 minutes, absolutely everything about the experience, for this child, was awesome. Or rather, “*Awesome!*”

The trailer for Disney’s forthcoming *The Muppets* was awesome (and it was), and the prelude to our feature presentation – a short-film reunion with the *Toy Story* characters titled *Hawaiian Adventure* – was awesome (and it really, really was). The first scene of the movie proper, in which a British sports-car spy with the voice of Michael Caine escaped certain destruction aboard an oil rig, was awesome with several exclamation points. And when we finally landed in the original *Cars*’ sleepy desert town of Radiator Springs, and the rusty, buck-toothed image of Larry the Cable Guy’s tow truck Mater rolled on-screen, man oh man was that “*Awesome!*” For the young moviegoer behind me – and many others in that packed auditorium – Mater’s first appearance was like Santa, the Easter Bunny, and the Second Coming all rolled up into one rickety, drawling, malapropism-dropping package.

By the movie’s second half-hour, my youthful neighbor’s euphoria had obviously waned, based on his restless gabbiness and the aforementioned kicks to my chair. But he still seemed to love the racing scenes and the frequent (and, I thought, somewhat inappropriate) machine-gun assaults, and Mater’s dim-bulb, hoo-*dawgie!* cadences appeared to keep him nicely tickled; no one could argue that this three- or four-year-old, amongst numerous others like him, didn’t have

Flat Tires: “Cars 2” and “Bad Teacher”

Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 26 June 2011 15:00

an overall awesome time at *Cars 2*. As for me, I think I enjoyed the film just as much as I enjoyed its predecessor, which means it's in a dead-heat tie for my least favorite Pixar release to date.

Visually, this continuation by directors John Lasseter and Brad Lewis is rather extraordinary. With *Cars 2* following Mater through an international-spy outing and his best pal Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson) on the international racing circuit, the film quickly trades dusty Radiator Springs for wondrously colorful locales in Japan, France, and England, and it's definitely a change for the better. (At least, it is if you watch the movie, as I did, without the hue-dimming irritation of 3D glasses.) Beyond delivering more eye-catching vibrancy than what we were given in the earth-tone palette of the original – even the overcast skies hanging over London, here, are gorgeously rendered – the scenic diversity allows for dozens more of those terrifically clever, terrifically *quick* visual nods and gags that help make Pixar Pixar. (Memo to Roger Ebert: You didn't imagine it. In the sequence set in Italy, you actually *did* see a Popemobile sitting in the confines of another Popemobile.)

And while it's hardly fresh, I kind of liked the storyline that found Mater recruited as a spy for British intelligence, partly because it gave Michael Caine (and, as a nefarious Gremlin, the great Joe Mantegna) plenty to say, and partly because it brought welcome relief from watching Wilson's race car, *again*, learning to throttle back his hotshot nature and appreciate his less worldly friends. As no humans ever enter this particular Pixar universe, the movie's spy-thriller angle suggests a 007 entry populated entirely by the secret agent's many artillery-laden, shape-shifting vehicles – *Cars 2* is like Baby's First Bond – and while the identity of the plot's secret mastermind should be easily guessed by anyone older than the kid sitting behind me, this puckish narrative still provides a fair degree of amusement.

What is also provides, though, is more – far, far, *far* more – of Larry the Cable Guy's incessant babbling, so for my money, the film's improvements on the first

Cars

are nullified right there. As a business decision, the choice to make Mater the sequel's star makes absolute sense; the beloved character's bumpkin number appears to set off an unfailing giggle reflex in kids (and not a few adults), and his punchlines are easily gleaned by anyone over the age of two. But for those of us not in thrall to Larry the Cable Guy's redneck shtick, Mater's – and his blue-collar alter ego's – emergence as

Cars 2

's true hero feels like nothing

but

a shrewd business decision, and a hellishly annoying one, at that. Would it have killed screenwriter Ben Queen and his “story by” collaborators to come up with a few routines for this

Flat Tires: “Cars 2” and “Bad Teacher”

Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 26 June 2011 15:00

wheeled hayseed that don't feel like bits too sophisticated for
Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.

? (Watch out, Mater! That pistachio ice cream is actually

wasabi

! Oh,

no-o-o-o

!)

This one-joke figure's one joke is played out before the end of his first *scene* and gets repeated
ad nauseam

for the next 90-plus minutes, and as dispiriting as Mater's/Larry's contributions are, they're actually trumped by the offensive use of the tow truck for cheap, wholly unearned melancholy. After inviting us, for about an hour, to roar at each one of Mater's public embarrassments and manglings of the English language, the filmmakers suddenly do an abrupt about-face, chiding Lightning McQueen – and, by extension, the audience

–

for laughing at this poor, sweet, big-hearted feller, who shouldn't be made fun of just 'cause he's a little different and never had no fancy book-learnin'.

Cars 2

sets Mater up as a figure of (comic) ridicule, and then ridicules us for ridiculing
him

; youths likely won't, but will their parents recognize this for the emotional bullying technique it is? Great-looking though it is, I found most of Pixar's latest lacking in wit, charm, and soul. For this especially lazy and cynical gesture, I wanted to send it to bed without supper.



BAD TEACHER

As a deceptively sunny middle-school educator who loathes her students, boozes it up in class, berates her co-workers with invective, and generally makes life hell for anyone within a 50-foot radius, Cameron Diaz, in *Bad Teacher*, is a gloriously unapologetic bitch. The actress is so often struck in unflattering or downright offensive roles that seeing her tear it up in director Jake Kasdan's high-spirited dark comedy is cause for celebration, and the happier surprise is that Diaz's Elizabeth Halsey isn't punished for her wicked, wicked ways. With its lead steadfastly

Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 26 June 2011 15:00

refusing to learn or “grow,”

Bad Teacher is the rare

R-rated farce with the courage of its nasty convictions; in Diaz’s supremely mean-spirited and infectiously engaging turn, her biting candor and confidence suggest not only that the meek aren’t inheriting the earth but don’t

deserve

to inherit the earth.

The huge laughs of the opening hour become a little muffled in the film’s final third, and while Kasdan’s timing and pacing are first-rate here, his shock-effect staging is a little amateurish. (We all would have been better off without the deliberate, obvious downward tilts to the crotches of Justin Timberlake’s educator and an anonymous, aroused middle-schooler.) Still, Diaz is splendid, the raunchy gags are plentiful and mostly successful, and every single cast member appears in top form. Given Timberlake’s bow-tie-wearing doofus, Jason Segel’s amiable gym teacher, Lucy Punch’s tic-laden antagonist, and Phyllis Smith’s sweetly befuddled doormat, picking a favorite second banana is practically impossible in *Bad Teacher*, but if pressed, I may have to go with John Michael Higgins’ aggressively cheerful yet frequently aggrieved principal, whose dolphin fetish Diaz takes expertly heartless advantage of. “I’ve always said that dolphins are the humans of the sea,” she purrs, prepping for her latest scam. “I have that bumper sticker!” the happily astonished Higgins replies, taking a two-second beat before adding, “It’s on my *car!*”

Follow Mike on Twitter at [Twitter.com/MikeSchulzNow](https://twitter.com/MikeSchulzNow) .