Written by Mike Schulz
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FINAL FANTASY: THE SPIRITS WITHIN

I can't imagine who could make sense of the gobbledygook plotting of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* , yet I can't imagine who will fail to be wowed by the movie's effects; it might be the most visually extraordinary, intellectually banal sci-fi work since *2001: A Space Odyssey.* There isn't a moment in the film that isn't amazing to watch, and that includes the moments when the heroine (voiced by Ming-Na) simply walks alone with her hair blowing lightly past her cheeks; *Final Fantasy* stands as the current standard-bearer in computerized realism.

The movie is like *Aliens* for the Greenpeace set, with the requisite group of culturally diverse commandos seeking a planet-healing "life force" while blasting scary creatures to shreds. But unlike the current, god-awful *Tomb Raider*, *Final Fantasy* is a videogame-movie in the best possible sense. The action scenes are powerfully exciting because the movie looks like a videogame to begin with; theatres should provide a joystick along with your ticket. By animating the whole film, the futuristic locales, and the movie itself, achieve a kind of grandeur; incorporating computer-generated humans into computer-generated backdrops gives the project a weird sort of reality (unlike, say, plunking Robin Williams in the animated world of *What Dreams May Come*) that other sci-fi flicks lack.

State-of-the-art though the film's visuals are, there's one aspect of human reality that computers haven't yet licked: creating believable facial expressions to match the voice-overs. It takes a while to adjust to characters emoting with the voices of Alec Baldwin, Steve Buscemi, Donald Sutherland, James Woods, Ving Rhames, and Peri Gilpin – and not looking a bit like the real actors – while their faces are as blank as the "humans" on *Baywatch*, but even this becomes oddly fascinating in the world of *Final Fantasy* ; you can see the movie as a stepping-stone to where visuals will someday lead. Director

Hironobu Sakaguchi's achievement is most definitely something to see; it'll require more quarters than your average arcade game, but it'll prove more satisfying, too.

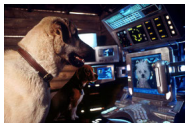
THE SCORE

Audiences hungry for *real* human interaction this summer will be insanely grateful for Frank Oz's heist flick *The Score*. It's not a great movie – it embraces every hoary cliché of its genre and wastes the talented Angela Bassett in a stock girlfriend role – but it's an awfully good one; the film is skillfully put together, features some nifty plot twists, and lets you witness three master thespians delivering the acting goods. Robert De Niro plays the master thief attempting to steal a priceless scepter, Edward Norton is the upstart who assumes the role of a mentally challenged janitor to infiltrate the warehouse it's stored in, and Marlon Brando is the scheme's eccentric puppetmaster, and it's to director Oz's immense credit that not only do these wildly disparate, one-man-show performers deliver terrific work, but they each make the *others* look good, too.

De Niro can be a drag in regular-Joe roles, but he's just what's called for here: cagey and alert, yet filled with a middle-aged wariness that makes him quite touching. The unbelievably clever Norton keeps his showstopping effects confined to his janitor character while adding a seething, unpredictable edginess to his youthful con. And Brando gives what is easily his finest performance since 1990's *The Freshman*. He's tremendously charismatic and appears to be having the time of his life; his off-screen (and on-screen) nuttiness in recent years makes it easy to forget how astounding he can be, but whenever he's on-screen in *The Score*, he owns the picture. The movie is a model of sheer craftsmanship and economy, the epitome of the well-made movie, and I wouldn't be surprised if it turns into a minor sensation this season; computer efffects are fun, to be sure, but they'll never replace the joy you can experience from really good actors.

KISS OF THE DRAGON

Despite its many violent interludes, *Kiss of the Dragon* is Hollywood's attempt at giving us a huggier, more emotionally accessible Jet Li, and thank God the plan backfires. (We already *have* a Jackie Chan.) When Li is forced into numerous dialogue-heavy scenes with Bridget Fonda, who plays a Paris-based, heroin-addicted, Nebraskan prostitute with a young daughter in a French orphanage – honestly, *none* of that is a typo – you might want to hide your face in embarrassment; Li doesn't yet appear comfortable with the English language, and he certainly doesn't appear comfortable with Ms. Fonda's atrocious acting, so he winds up looking pained and a little confused, just as we in the audience are. Blessedly, he gets his fair share of ass-kicking moments – the best one occurs in a hotel's laundry room, and there's a marvelous, lightning-quick gag of Li sticking it to a security guard – and when he's performing his human-whirligig martial-arts moves, he's enormously fun to watch. The film's storyline is nonsense, and director Chris Nahon can't get a rhythm going when Li's feet and fists aren't in the air, but *Kiss of the Dragon* still offers the occasional visceral thrill; trapped within this mostly worthless 100 minutes is a really good 20-minute short.



CATS & DOGS

With five-plus months to go, I can't imagine sitting through a worse 2001 release than the talking-pets comedy *Cats & Dogs*, and remember, I saw *Freddy Got Fingered*. This isn't just because the movie is astonishingly unfunny, or because it continues Hollywood's maddening trend of filling a "children's" movie with urine and excrement jokes, or because it makes the usually sly Jeff Goldblum and Elizabeth Perkins look like fools, or because it showcases a

young actor (Alexander Pollock) so insipid that he makes *The Phantom Menace* ’s Jake Lloyd look like Haley Joel freakin’ Osment. All of this helps, of course, but it’s the filmmaking by director Lawrence Guterman and his visual-effects team that really does the trick – the movie is the visual equivalent of whiplash.

If you’re going to make a live-action flick about talking animals, you have a few choices: attempting the *Babe* method of visually altering the creatures’ mouths so it appears they’re conversing, using puppets, or adding computer-generated animals to real backgrounds. What you should *not* do is incorporate all three styles in the same movie, let alone the same scene; the film’s action keeps switching between real animals to quasi-real animals to completely unrealistic animals, and the effect is not only exhausting, but it kills the only possible interest one could have in the film; if we don’t giggle at the possibility that the animals really are pulling off the tricks the movie assigns them, why not just animate the whole damn thing in the first place? It’s bad enough that *Cats & Dogs* is totally charmless and laugh-free, but intentionally crappy filmmaking can make an ordinarily bad movie utterly repellant.