

Written by Mike Schulz
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In a colon-happy summer that's already given us *X2: X-Men United*, *Dumb & Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd*, *Throttle*, and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, this past week

saw the debut of three more excessively wordy titles:

Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines, *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, & Blonde*

, and

Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas

. While these longer monikers are, admittedly, kinda helpful – they give you a good idea of what to expect from the

Terminator

and

Legally Blonde

sequels, and the

Sinbad

subheading assures you that, no, it's

not

a concert film featuring the one-time

Star Search

champion – they can play hell on print reviewers with limited space. So, for purposes of this article, the aforementioned will hereby be referred to as

T3

,

LB2

, and ... oh, I guess

Sinbad

will do.

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TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES

A sense of humor is always greatly appreciated in a ball-busting action flick, so it was with enormous relief that I found myself laughing in the first 15 minutes of *T3*. Actually, the whole movie comes as a relief. Though not quite as accomplished as James Cameron's first two entries in the series, *T3*
, helmed by *Breakdown*
and *U-571*
director Jonathan Mostow, is a speedy, exciting take on the *Terminator*
saga, bristling with good humor and nifty visuals, and it has a killer finale. (It's also less annoyingly portentous than Cameron's *T2*
, and, at 109 minutes, a good deal shorter.) As he is wont to repeat, Arnold Schwarzenegger's monosyllabic, robotic protector is back, this time to save twentysomething John Connor (Nick Stahl, a slight improvement over Edward Furlong) and his gal pal (Claire Danes) from annihilation at the hands of an upgraded cyborg (Kristanna Loken). Naturally, this coincides with all manner of end-of-the-world hooey and time/space blather, but the nuances of this series' labyrinthine plot are always better left ignored; we line up for the explosions and Ah-nuld kicking ass.

No audience member expecting anything but dumb, loud summertime fun should leave disappointed; the onscreen destruction is so massive that it's a bit breathtaking, and though the CGI effects occasionally show their seams, Mostow's staging is clever and alert. Yet what elevates the film above the blockbuster norm is the quality of its jokes. Having the terminatrix make her first appearance among the mannequins in a storefront window is a hilarious comment on Loken's (intentional) blankness, but that gag is bested by Arnold's visit to a cowboy bar, which is an incredibly witty homage to a similar scenario in *T2*; all throughout the film, Mostow and his writers deliver in-jokes that should tickle the *T2*
crowd without alienating latecomers. The movie is nothing more than easily disposable summertime entertainment, but considering how few films manage to even succeed at *that*
, the punchy and effective

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T3
pulls it off rather wonderfully.



LEGALLY BLONDE 2: RED, WHITE, & BLONDE

Numerous friends – women, mostly – have asked me what I thought of *LB2*, and when I tell them I could barely stand it, their response is always the same: “Well, I’m sure it’s bad, but I’m gonna go anyway ’cause of Reese Witherspoon.” This troubles me, because as much as I like this actress – and is there anyone alive who doesn’t? – it suggests The Second Coming of Sandra Bullock. Though it feels like forever ago, everyone once loved

her

, too, but too many formulaic and blasé choices spoiled the enjoyment of her charms; many of us now view Bullock’s involvement in a project as a major warning sign: Caution! Rampant Mediocrity Ahead! And although she appears to possess more natural talent than Bullock, who has yet to give a performance of comic inventiveness equal to Witherspoon’s spectacular work in

Election

, our Reese – after the

Blonde

films and

Sweet Home Alabama

– could quickly become a danger signal herself: Caution! Obnoxiously Self-Satisfied, I’m-Not-as-Vapid-as-You-Think-I-Am Comedy Ahead!

For the moment, though, we’ll let her slide. Replaying uber-perky attorney Elle Woods, now on an animal-rights crusade in Washington, D.C., Witherspoon practically glistens with confidence and comic authority, and her timing is exquisite; this delightful comedienne can wring laughs from the world’s lamest punchlines. A good thing, too, because the *LB2* script gives her nothing

but

lame punchlines. Aside from a moderately enjoyable subplot regarding the sexual orientation of Elle’s pooch, the film doesn’t feature a single scene with any wit or surprise – it’s one of those political comedies that you just

know

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will end with the whole of Congress standing up to applaud the heroine's big speech, so you spend the entire movie aching to just

get

there already. Among

LB2

's injured parties are Sally Field (cast, too obviously, as a D.C. turncoat), Regina King, Luke Wilson, Jennifer Coolidge, and an atypically unfunny Bob Newhart, but, in the long run, it might be Ms. Witherspoon who suffers the worst; without a change in her present career trajectory,

LB2

might wind up being a title we look back on when we say, "Remember when we used to

like

her?"



SINBAD: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN SEAS

I know they're still relative newbies in this department, but is there anything that can be done to make Dreamworks' animated movies, you know, *fun*? From 1998's *The Prince of Egypt* to 2000's

The Road to El Dorado

to last summer's

Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron

, the studio's animated works have been visually impressive but sadly lackluster entertainments; they're not necessarily

boring

, but you're hard-pressed to remember much about them 10 minutes after leaving the theatre.

(And the moviegoing public might be catching on to this; I saw a late-morning screening of that last film on its opening day and was the only one there.)

Dreamworks' latest, the generic adventure comedy *Sinbad*, features a handful of beautifully drawn action sequences, and there's some inspired synergy between the animation of the villainous Eris and Michelle Pfeiffer, who provides the character's vocals; Pfeiffer's seductive purr is the perfect compliment to the animators' nearly liquid visualization of this goddess of chaos. But the rest of the film is bland beyond measure. Its story hasn't been worked out in any

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inventive, let alone logical, fashion, and all of the hackneyed, Disneyfied elements – cocky hero, spunky heroine, “funny” animal sidekick – are set squarely in their places. Worse still, the actors’ line readings – Pfeiffer’s excepted – are as two-dimensional as their screen counterparts. Brad Pitt’s Midwestern flatness makes Sinbad himself an incredibly bland swashbuckler, Catherine Zeta-Jones brings shockingly little energy to her romantic foil, and poor Dennis Haysbert vocalizes Sinbad’s wise, stalwart shipmate and doesn’t even get one amusing thing to say or do. It was probably inevitable that

Sinbad

would be outclassed (and, at the box office, outperformed) by

Finding Nemo

, yet anyone opting for a second visit to the Disney work over a first viewing of the Dreamworks opus couldn’t be blamed in the least.