

Cameron delivers with Avatar



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BY ALEX CARLSON
Reviewer

James Cameron has left a massive legacy of science fiction over the course of modern film. Thanks to mammoth films like "The Terminator" and "Titanic," Cameron has set an example in

making movie masterpieces. His newest vision is a big one. "Avatar," one of sci-fi's most anticipated films, has landed.

"Avatar" wastes no time getting down to business when it comes to the story. Without hesitation, the film introduces the Avatar concept: A genetic body that a person can control using a special bed. Upon entering the bed, the person's consciousness is transferred to the Avatar. In this case, it's used to become one of the Na'vi, inhabitants of the resource-rich planet of Pandora.

Enter Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a handicapped soldier who is enlisted to participate in using the Avatar for

the military. In an act of diplomacy, Jake must convince the indigenous people to leave their land so the humans can harvest the energy resources. However, things change once Jake learns more about the Na'vi. He gathers more information about their culture, spirituality and connection with the planet of Pandora. Jake is taught by a female Na'vi named Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), and is ultimately accepted into the tribe of the Na'vi.

Once the humans hear of his "betrayal," Jake is forced to battle the humans and protect the Na'vi people.

The entire plot is reminiscent of the film classic "Dances with

Wolves." A man, once alien to a culture, learns the ways of and is accepted by an indigenous people, eventually fighting against his own species. "Avatar" changes up the story a bit, however, forcing two lives upon Jake Sully's character simultaneously. This parallel strikes a clever balance of sorts, in which Jake must compensate for both individuals, ultimately choosing one. Also, the sci-fi element, especially the state-of-consciousness that is the Avatar itself, is an engaging addition.

However, "Avatar" also has some nagging issues.

First, it's very predictable. One scene in particular, during which Neytiri explains to Jake about a giant bird-like creature that only five Na'vi have tamed, makes it very easy to foresee Jake's ability to tame the creature later on. To be fair, there are a few shocking moments and the action sequences really are intense and harrowing. However, there is a lack of subtlety in the storyline, and by the end of the movie the action and fantasy elements overshadow the familiar storyline.

Second, the pacing is uneven. The sequence in the film in which Jake is learning about the Na'vi people feels rushed and you feel like the gradual gathering of experience is shorter than it should be. Packing so many moments into three hours is daring on the cast and crew's

parts, but some rushed storyline deliveries hurt an otherwise grandiose tale.

From a technical standpoint, however, "Avatar" knows no equal. In contrast to many other fantasy epics, like "The Lord of the Rings," "Avatar" takes a natural approach to things. The world of Pandora is represented with an unprecedented amount of beauty and majesty, whether it's the vistas of floating mountains or the simply epic confrontations between the humans and Na'vi. The magnificent aerial views will instantly floor you. The amount of detail and naturalistic wonder that exists in the fully-realized Pandora world are some of the best special effects seen in a long time. Overall, this is a tremendous step for special effects in a film, and no doubt will leave you breathless by its conclusion.

"Avatar" is not a perfect film, but it remains a tried-and-true formula with a science-fiction-fantasy twist and sky-high production values. The immense presentation is one of the best in the science-fiction genre. The world teems with life and natural beauty, a sharp contrast to the machine-driven apocalypses for which James Cameron is best known. It has its rushed moments and some predictable plot points, but if you're looking for a fantastically-realized world with a strong, albeit familiar, storyline, "Avatar" has the style and substance to satisfy.



Photo courtesy of rottentomatoes.com

Clooney's latest inspires viewers



BY ALEX BOLES
Reviewer

OK, I get it. The economy sucks and jobs are sparse. But never before have I walked out of a movie not knowing how to feel.

"Up in the Air" is Paramount's newest box office release starring George Clooney (Ryan Bingham), Vera Farmiga (Alex Goran) and Anna Kendrick (Natalie Keener). Ryan Bingham's less-than-exciting job of firing people for a living gets a smack in the face when Natalie Keener waltzes in with a MySpace page and a new-age idea to implement a Skype-like technique of firing people, instead of wasting money sending their "terminators" "Up in the Air" 270 days of the year. After Bingham throws a hissy fit to his boss and proves that Keener needs more field experience before letting technology take away his goal of reaching 10 million frequent flier miles, his boss decides to make Bingham take Keener with him on his next few trips to show her the works.

Of course, a good movie is nothing without a romantic side story. Cue Alex Goran, another frequent flier who gets her jollies from men with high miles and a Hilton Gold Card. When Goran meets up with Bingham, who has a 23-year-old girl, Keener reveals her wild side when her long-time boyfriend breaks up with her via text message and the trio crashes a technology party at their hotel.

The rest of the movie pans out as Bingham discovers that life is better with a co-pilot, and Keener decides to follow the dreams she had before being dragged to Omaha for a boy.

I could be shunned for saying this, but Clooney's career has been on the downslope for

a while, aided by the disaster of "Burn After Reading." He redeemed himself in this movie because, as a whole, it is great. However, we really don't see much from Clooney that we haven't seen before. Truthfully, Clooney's age came through strongly in this film, which makes sense, because an underlying message in the film is about how corporate life has become out with the old and in with the new.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Farmiga, we've seen her in movies such as "The Departed," as the psychiatrist who falls for both DiCaprio and Damon, and "Orphan," as the foster mother of a 40-year-old demon child. I love her work and think she has a lot of potential, but in all three films the writers show her without clothes. I loathe the actors who think they only can make it if they take their clothes off. Especially in this movie, the nudity was unnecessary and out of the blue, making most of the audience turn their heads and ask, "Why?"

Of the trio, I would only deem Kendrick worthy of winning her Golden Globe nomination. Clooney and Farmiga were great, but they didn't step out of their comfort zones enough to deserve this prestigious award. Relatively unknown before playing Jessica in the "Twilight" Saga, Kendrick proved her abilities against Clooney, winner of several awards, including the Golden Globe. Her performance showed Hollywood that she is capable of being a malleable actor, successful in multiple genres.

"Up in the Air" is worth the cash to see it in theaters, and — if you're from St. Louis — definitely see it because St. Louis hot-spots are scattered throughout the film. Although the film's message is about unemployment rates skyrocketing, technology replacing people's jobs and showing that living life without a co-pilot is not worth living, I found it inspiring. You're left with the urge to follow your dreams, and that's an awesome feeling to be left with after watching a film.

Mudvayne lacks originality



BY COREY BOMMEL
Reviewer

Mudvayne

Whenever a band releases a self-titled album, it is usually a declaration to the public that it will be either their magnum opus or a definitive turning point in the band's style. Their Magnus Opus, however, this was not. Nu-metal rockers Mudvayne recently released their self-titled album, following 2008's "The New Game." This album bridges the gap between Mudvayne's earlier releases and the more radio friendly "New Game." The songs are heavier but still hold the lingering elements of their previous outing.

They also still tend to use gimmicks to gain popularity and to stand out in a crowd of similar artists. This album's gimmicks include special artwork on the case that can only be observed by holding a black light to it. Sure, it's interesting, but it doesn't really

help the album stand out as anything new.

Lyrical, the album offers little in the way of the creativity demonstrated in past albums. Most of the songs penned by singer Chad Grey deal with the same tired topics and become monotonous. Grey sings of being alone in the world with no one to understand him or his struggles with life and gripes about the establishment. Just look at some of the song titles — "Heard it All Before," "Dead Inside" and "Scream with Me" — and it becomes obvious. This lyrical style works for younger bands, but an established band like Mudvayne should have come to terms with these issues and learned to write at a higher level.

However, "Mudvayne" does deliver instrumentally, demonstrating the band members' true talents. This is especially evident with "I Can't Wait," the album's most intense track. Every band member comes out of the gate at full speed on this one, and it delivers the goods. Mudvayne experiments a little bit with "Dead Inside," their first ever acoustic track, which offers a nice change of pace from the sonic onslaught of the other tracks. The album isn't horrible to listen to, but Mudvayne will have to re-examine their sound if they plan to be relevant in the future.



Photo courtesy of mudvayne.com

Ke\$ha

Rushing to the scene with her first album, "Animal," is electro-dance pop brat Ke\$ha. The album received great exposure with the No. 1 hit "Tik Tok," which is now a staple on the radio. "Animal" contains little by way of inspiring lyrics or unique tunes, but that's not what Ke\$ha sets out to accomplish.

What the album does contain is a collection of dance pop with strong beats and pop lyrics leaning towards the sexual. Ke\$ha is not afraid to flaunt her bratty Hollywood antics in her lyrics, as partying, drinking excessively and sexual encounters are the theme of every song on here. This idea of a woman flipping roles to become a sexist who objectifies men is nothing new, and an entire album of these sophomoric lyrics does not garner much credibility for Ke\$ha. We know you are a liberated woman. Get on with

some originality.

An excessive use of auto-tune and vocorders on many of the tracks leads to a very gimmicky album as well. A collaboration with fellow electro-pop band 3OH!3 on "Blah Blah Blah" demonstrates all of these sins being committed at once. The song follows a girl trying to pick up a random guy at a bar, forcibly telling him through a vocoder "Don't be a little b---- with your chit-chat / Just show me where your d---- is at." The entire album is set up along these same lines with excessive songs such as "Party at a Rich Dude's House," "Kiss and Tell" and "Take It Off" all offering similar end results.

Several of the songs do diverge from the same old beats offering musical interludes similar to Freezepop, but with none of the charm. "Animal" offers danceable beats as long as you can ignore the repetitive lyrical content.

Romantic comedy delights audiences



BY KEN DUSOLD
Reviewer

Add romantic comedies to the list of things that can get better with age, because director-producer Nancy Meyers' newest film successfully challenges the long-held assumption that rom-coms, by which they have come to be known, are the business of only Hollywood's 20- and 30-somethings. "It's Complicated" is an uproarious comedy and arguably the best addition to the romantic comedy field in the last 10 years. That distinction is, in no small part, because of its cast's tremendous comedic talents.

Meryl Streep stars as Jane, an entrepreneur who has recently become an empty-nester with her youngest daughter going off to college. Her children worship the ground she walks on. Her son-in-law to be, Harley (Jon Krasinski), loves her as if she were his own mother. Even Jane's employees at her bakery-café show great respect and awe whenever she is present. Granted, this could be because the actress playing Jane is the most honored of her generation and easily one of the greatest to have worked in front of the camera, but one must digress for the film's sake.

Everything seems perfect for Jane — everything except for Jake (Alec Baldwin).

Jake is Jane's ex-husband of 10 years. After 20 years of marriage, Jake left her for Agnes (Lake Bell). With the minor concession that Bell is attractive, it is an example of the film's few weaknesses that Jake would ever choose the annoyingly overbearing Agnes over the lovable and contagiously sweet Jane. But all romantic comedies need a complication, and Jake's affair and subsequent divorce from Jane are required for the film to work, so we forgive Meyers for the oversight.

Jake, forgetting why he is with his second wife, begins to see the same qualities in Jane he originally saw when they were dating. He begins to lure her into a relationship. At the same time, however, Jane is planning a remodel of her Santa Barbara, Calif., home, and her architect (Steve Martin) seems interested in more than just the dimensions of her bedroom. And there is our pesky complication.

Streep, who turned 60 this past year, looks better than ever. Although she has won Academy Awards for two very serious roles in "Kramer v. Kramer" and "Sophie's Choice," the woman with a record 15 Oscar nominations is the best in her field even when doing the occasional comedy. A scene in which Jane and Jake meet secretly at a hotel where Harley and their daughter happen to be having lunch will surely become an instant classic, as will a hilarious 10-minute interval involving a joint and "feelin' groovy."

Baldwin, the baby of the three leads at only 51, is hypnotically charming and outrageously funny. His character attempts to be hip when he is closer to getting a hip replacement, drives around in a Porsche 911 and uses texting lingo in conversations. He paints a perfect portrait of a man at the tail end of a decade-long mid-life crisis.

Comedy legend Martin shines as Adam,



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who, like Jane, is divorced from a cheating spouse and looking for a second chapter in life. He is tremendously sincere when discussing his divorce with Jane, and yet maintains his traditional goofy character when suffering from the effects of his encounter with pot.

Krasinski, who plays co-manager Jim Halpert on "The Office," fares exceptionally well against his heavyweight co-stars. His comedic timing is impeccable as he even manages to steal a few laughs from Baldwin and Martin.

With support from actresses Mary Kay Place ("Sweet Home Alabama") and Rita Wilson ("Runaway Bride"), this film certainly gives an all-too-often underrepresented population of theater-going audiences a chance to see excellence and peers at work in a hugely popular genre. With 1999's "What Women Want," which focused on baby boomers nearing 50, and 2003's "Something's Gotta Give," which became one of the first films displaying romantic leads in their late 50s and early 60s, Nancy Meyers has shown us that an actor or actress' golden years can be translated into gold at the box office.

"It's Complicated" is not a perfect film, but it is closer than recent attempts have come to being a perfect romantic comedy.