

Movie Review: 'Beowulf'

by Arthur Salm

"Beowulf," a largely digital sword and sorcery, monster and dragon 3-D (in some theaters) flick, is taken from that very same 3,183-line Old English epic poem we were all force-fed a few lines of in high school.

'BEOWULF' - Queen Wealhthow (voiced by Robin Wright Penn) appears in a dream fantasy of the hero of 'Beowulf.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Since the specter of the hideous Grendel was seared into our shaken, gore-drench psyches, then cauterized for nightmare access, expectations for his coming to awful screen life will be high, if necessarily tremulous. Relax ... but of course you can't: The creature, as realized here, is flat-out terrifying, and disgusting times six - everything you could hope he'd be, and everything a 6th century mead-quaffing, wench-appreciating warrior wishes he weren't.

The plot couldn't be much simpler. A great Danish hall presided over by the aging King Hrothgar (Anthony

Hopkins) is attacked by the monster Grendel, who slays many of the warriors within. Hrothgar's call for a hero to rid the land of Grendel is answered by the champion Beowulf (Ray Winstone), who in a long, unspeakably bloody battle ...

Or, maybe we weren't all introduced to the poem in high school.

Able adapted by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary, who laced the script with only a smattering of ponderous clunkers, the film sticks reasonably close to the A.D. 700 (or thereabouts) unknown author's tale, until all of a sudden it doesn't. When Beowulf confronts Grendel's mother, she rises from the water as a mostly gilded Angelina Jolie, a vision that could deflect any warrior, or any film, from the path of righteousness.

There's also heat being generated between Beowulf and Wealhthow (Robin Wright Penn), the fair and unsatisfied queen, as well as bad blood between Beowulf and Unferth (John Malkovich), who may have designs on the crown. All of the goings-on are overlain by the growing influence of an upstart new religion, Christianity, which frowns upon such foolishness as monster-battling, and may presage the end of the age of heroes. Not in the original text, but not bad, as freewheeling adaptations go.

The digitalized actors at times - in 3-D, at least - appear to be marionette-like paper cutouts, and expressiveness necessarily suffers. But the real/not-quite-real aura, while distracting, also adds to the flavor of the tale: There are, after all, monsters, not the least of which is the best doggone dragon you've ever seen.

Director Robert Zemeckis moves things along lickety-split; for such a dark, heavy tale, lit by gray, diffuse far-northern skies and golden torchlight, the film is remarkably light on its feet. The few attempts at humor - Beowulf strips for battle, resulting in a series of early day Austin-Powers-like Hide the Privates shots - yank us out of the 6th century, but it's never long before a monster chases us right back.

In short, you can almost taste the mead. Even if you don't know what mead tastes like.

A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Robert Zemeckis. Writers: Neil Gaiman, Roger Avary. Cast: Ray Winstone, Anthony Hopkins, Robin Wright Penn, Jon Malkovich. Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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