

DVD Select: 'Beowulf' a ripping good tale

by Robert_J_Hawkins

"This has nothing to do with the 'Beowulf' you were forced to read in high school." On this matter, director Robert Zemeckis is emphatic when he's speaking on the DVD extras.

'BEOWULF' - Beowulf confronts Grendel the monster's mother, a water demon played by Angelina Jolie, in the fantasy movie 'Beowulf.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin True, his "Beowulf" (Paramount, 2 1/2 stars) is shot in 3-D motion-capture animation. And there is tons more limb-ripping by the monster Grendel (Crispin Glover). Yes, in 3-D motion-capture animation, even Glover can rip manly creatures, limb from limb. And his mom, the shapely, shifting water monster with the gypsy-fortune-teller accent (Angelina Jolie), wears 4-inch heels. Who knew they carried Manolo Blahniks in the eighth century?

Does the movie play loose with the Old English epic poem? Of course. And why not? The wretched thing was written hundreds of years ago and parts of it are still surrounded by ambiguity - thus licensing it to interpretation and thus keeping hack professors in employment on bucolic campuses everywhere.

In this "Beowulf," stuff is rearranged and condensed to serve the Hollywood narrative. But let's be honest, no more than six of you can remember jack about the poem, except that it was in a language that barely resembled English and the test questions were incredibly hard. Hey, brother, I'm with you.

Just the same, co-writers Neil Gaiman ("Sandman") and Roger Avary ("Pulp Fiction") hew close enough to the original poem that there was no need to re-title it "Larry the Dragon Slayer" or "Norm Helps Out his Neighbors."

Similarly, Zemeckis and his gang hew close enough to the ultraviolent video gaming genre to keep this thing flying on the screen.

As the movie opens, aging Danish King Hrothgar (Anthony Hopkins) and his equally besotted subjects are having a ripping housewarming in the new Great Hall. All, that is, except the king's trophy wife, Queen Wealtheow (Robin Wright Penn). She's clearly and permanently annoyed at the king, perhaps because he has dedicated the hall as "a place of merriment, joy and fornication."

Also annoyed, in a distant cave, is a massive misshapen tower of vomit, hair and really bad teeth with arms and legs - Grendel. The revelry is driving him nuts. Grendel roars into the hall and begins dismembering warriors as if they were rag dolls. Oddly, Grendel chooses not to shred the king.

Hrothgar's craven adviser Unferth (John Malkovich) suggests a few offerings to the gods, especially one of the new fledgling Christians, to help rid them of the monster, but the king isn't buying any of it.

"The gods will do nothing for us that we can not do for ourselves. What we need is a hero," he says.

And sure enough, straight out of the roiling sea with his band of Germanic rowdies arrives salvation. "I am Beowulf," Ray Winstone bellows. "I am here to kill your monster." Hero or not, Beowulf immediately develops a fatal attraction for the king's wife, and she for him.

It is the queen who informs Beowulf that "the demon is my husband's shame."

A stark-naked Beowulf does slay Grendel in a colossal battle of hand-to-hand combat, but not before a dying Grendel tells mum who did the deed. She responds by killing nearly all of Beowulf's men as he sleeps in the Great Hall. Thirsting for vengeance, Beowulf goes to slay the mother, but like Hrothgar before him, the seductive charms of the mother are irresistible. He too spawns a monster. This is the way of men ruled by testosterone. They think with their sword.

Spring ahead several decades and an aging Beowulf is king, and a good one, and yet he knows some day his own shame will rise up and confront him. When it does, it's a corker - a massive flying fire-breathing dragon. Somebody's got to vanquish the thing before it turns the entire countryside into a pile of charcoal briquettes. Who you gonna call? (You can almost hear Beowulf sighing, "I'm too old for this bleep.")

If "Beowulf" has a failing it is the same one that plagues Zemeckis' other motion capture misadventure, "The Polar Express." We've all seen hyper-real 3-D animation ("300" is close), and at the other end of the spectrum are the brightly lit Pixar movies. Somewhere in between is the Zemeckis model in which the characters sometimes move like puppets on strings and all seem to have a sleepy Quaalude quality.

Just when you're getting into the "I'm here to kill your monster" groove, the Beowulf character's face goes distant, the tiniest hint of a seizure. And Queen Wealtheow never looks like she is totally of this planet. The most consistently convincing is the craven, duplicitous Unferth. The computer guys can do dark and shady very well.

That said, all animation counts on one thing to work - the story. Without a good one, well told, you don't have a movie, no matter how realistic the pixels. "Beowulf" is a ripping good tale - maybe a little overboard on the ripping.

This is also a DVD that's worth diving into the extras, especially if you are at all curious about motion

capture and how a middle-age tubby like Ray Winstone can be transformed into the lean and rippling mass of muscle Beowulf. Enlightening and entertaining stuff.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Death at a Funeral" (MGM) British, madcap comedy about two brothers and an assorted host of kin and quirky others who gather to see the old man off. Only to discover that the proper old chap had a few skeletons in the closet, so to speak. A bit on the claustrophobic side.

"The Darjeeling Limited" (Fox) Another quirky Wes Anderson exploration of dysfunctional familial love. I never grow tired of it. Owen Wilson, Adrien Brody and Jason Schwartzman are brothers (if you can imagine) on a train ride across India.

"30 Days of Night" (Sony) Let's see, no, it's not the land of the midnight sun ... it's the other way: A month of darkness in the remote town of Barrow, Alaska, during which most of the natives leave and tourists descend upon the town. Just kidding. They're zombies. Go ahead, shoot a few. Sam Raimi has a producer credit. But don't shoot him.

"Slipstream" (Sony) Anthony Hopkins must have jumped right from the motion-capture suit and sets of "Beowulf" into this, a movie in which he could play a guy who is only going just a little bonkers. In this comic-noir mystery, Hopkins is a screenwriter hired to rewrite a murder mystery set in a desert diner. Much to his befuddlement, the movie's characters materialize before him, as real as anything in Hollywood. Ah, to take refuge from life's treacherous shoals in the dream state.

And so many more:

In "Day Zero" Elijah Wood, Chris Kline and Jon Bernthal are best pals drafted into the military (set in the near-future). They've got 30 days to blow steam before reporting for duty - just so they don't do it in Barrow, Alaska.

"Legend of the Black Scorpion" (Genius) If Shakespeare had been known as the Black Belt of Stratford, this might have been his idea of a good show at The Globe.

"Raising Flagg" (Cinema Libre) In a surprising lack of departure, Alan Arkin plays a mule-headed fellow in a lifelong feud with his neighbor (Austin Pendleton).

"Goya's Ghosts" (Sony) Milos Forman directs Javier Bardem, Natalie Portman and Stellan Skarsgard in this historical drama about the celebrated painter and his muse in the time of the Spanish Inquisition.

"Darkon" (Porchlight Home Entertainment) Everybody knows one, and we've all told them the same thing: Get a life. Yes, live-action role players, those people who get dressed up in period costumes and spend endless hours arguing about the authenticity of some guy's polyester codpiece. This is a documentary about those special people.

IT CAME FROM TV

"1968 with Tom Brokaw" (A&E) I'd prefer if Brokaw went back to puffing out the "greatest generation" and left 1968 to others, like author Mark Kurlansky. Brokaw's perspective is media-entertainment skewed and has little to do with the real (and unfamous) people who lived through that era.

"Comanche Moon" (Sony) Chapter two in the "Lonesome Dove" epic Western saga stars Val Kilmer, Steve Zahn, Rachel Griffiths, Karl Urban, Linda Cardellini and Wes Studi.

Also: The Stratford Inn is open for business with proprietors Dick and Joanna Loudon in the first season of "Newhart." Dr. Richard Kimble is still on the run in season one, volume two of "The Fugitive."

If this is Feb. 26, then Jackie Gleason would be 92 years old. It is but he isn't, so to his memory we have "The Color Honeymooners Collection No. 2," available today. Also, Tom Selleck returns for the fourth chapter in the police chief with a drinking problem in "Jesse Stone: Sea Change."

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