

Movie Review: 'Speed Racer'

by Peter Rowe

Speed kills, but it also thrills. Watching Andy and Larry Wachowski's hyperkinetic, candy-colored "Speed Racer" is like spending two hours caroming through a pinball machine. Sense and subtlety are road kill as the cartoon-deep plot zips by, but your inner third grader will be too jazzed to complain.

'SPEED RACER' - Emile Hirsch's Speed Racer is a two-dimensional character in the action film 'Speed Racer.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) If, that is, you still have an inner 8-year-old. If you're totally grown-up, you'll find "Speed" a long, dreary, migraine-inducing slog.

But for everyone else, this is the best Wachowski Brothers extravaganza since the first "Matrix." If it lacks that sci-fi epic's storytelling ingenuity, it's also free of that film's ponderous, quasi-religious overtones. Speed Racer - yes, that's our hero's name - is no one's savior. He's just a car-crazy kid who grows up to become the hottest new talent in the World Racing League.

Blame it on his genes. Speed's father, Pops Racer (John Goodman), runs a family racing business. Mom Racer (Susan Sarandon) encourages Speed to follow in the skid marks of older brother Rex (Scott Porter, the disabled quarterback in TV's "Friday Night Lights") - even after Rex's spectacular career ends in a fiery, and apparently fatal, accident.

In his sleek Mach 5, Speed (Emile Hirsch) wins the attention of an oil magnate, a big wheel in the racing world. Royalton (Roger Allam) is intent on buying Speed's services or, failing that, buying every race.

What follows is a series of increasingly more desperate showdowns between Speed and Royalton's team of unscrupulous racers and thuggish hangers-on. The Fuji race, the fabled Casa Cristo rally and the championship Grand Prix flash past in a whirl of gravity-defying motion. At one point, the evil Snake Oiler forces Speed off a sheer cliff. No problem. Speed skids into a turn, then rockets up this vertical surface. Take that, Isaac Newton!

A handful of subplots fail to slow the pace or add much interest. Speed's romance with Trixie (Christina Ricci, twinkling her way through a pedestrian part) is stuck in first gear. A rival racer (Korean pop star Rain) is hard to pin down - his personality undergoes a complete oil change with every lap, shifting from Royalton protege to Speed's treacherous "ally" to hero for no discernible reasons.

But the Wachowskis have made a kid's film, painting with the broadest possible strokes. Even in the rare static shots, the screen is awash in eye-popping colors and over-the-top emotions. "I go to the races to watch you make art," Mom Racer tells Speed, "and that's beautiful and inspiring and everything that art should be."

"Speed Racer" is not all a movie should be. It lacks emotional power, depth, even comic relief that is - really, is this too much to ask? - funny. (That task is entrusted to Speed's younger brother, Spritle, and his pet chimp, Chim-Chim. Not even Central Park has ever endured so much ferocious mugging.)

But "Speed Racer" takes audiences for a fast, good-natured ride. A kiddy ride, yes, but on occasion it's a blast to let the youngsters slam the pedal to the metal.

"Speed Racer." Running time: 2 hours, 9 minutes. Rated: PG. 3 stars.

Movie Review: 'Speed Racer' by Peter Rowe