

The Screen Savor: Movie Review of 'Cars'

by Kimberly_Gadette

MORE DRAG THAN RACE

Attention all units, attention all units! Requesting immediate backup. The pace, the plot and the protagonist of "Cars" have all been carjacked. Any-one with information regarding this theft is asked to contact the Highway Patrol immediately.

Photo: CNS courtesy of Eric Cahrbonneau Pixar knows how to do great graphics, and is a genius at creating animated worlds we've never seen before. Pixar is also brilliant at utilizing performers, capturing their spirit and often their facial expressions, formulating a premium blend of actor-meets-computer-generated imagery. But between the large group of writers, director John Lasseter ("Toy Story" "A Bug's Life" "Toy Story 2") and editor Ken Schretzmann, I fear that in this case, this race, the filmmakers have fallen sleep at the wheel.

The film opens with a NASCAR-esque race around the track. And around and around and around. If it weren't for Sheryl Crow's energetic singing of "Real Gone," I would have been Real Bored. Perhaps if the scene had been cut in half, there might have been a chance for some excitement, especially with the fun touches of this auto-cratic universe: car fans rooting in the stands, flashing their own headlights instead of BIC lighters, girlie groupie cars backstage, car-nouncers calling the race from the broadcasting booth, lady cars standing in line at their lavatory, anxious to relieve their tanks, while man cars stroll into their restroom

without a wait. After the overlong race ends in a three-way tie between the old legend, the smarmy runner-up and the film's protagonist rookie, Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson), it is decided that there will be a winner-take-all drive-through in California. But on the way to the final contest, McQueen gets lost, car-ashing into a car-thrill little town and ultimately discovers that he has a heart, buried deep inside his engine block.

As voiced by Paul Newman, the 1951 Hornet Hudson, "Doc Hudson," is drawn to perfection. He has a back story, motivation, an inner life - he's a conflicted soul on wheels. But in contrast to Doc Hudson, Lightning McQueen comes out of nowhere. He's portrayed as just another hotshot kid who thinks that fame and fortune will make him happy. Animated or not, who a character is, what he wants, why he wants it and what stands in his way in order to get it are facts that an audience needs to know about the protagonist in order to champion him along his ride. Since there's no clue as to who he is or what "drives" him - the audience is robbed and ultimately cares more about the traffic waiting outside, offscreen, than the animated bumpers onscreen.

(Buckle your seatbelts, there's more.) The film depicts a courtship scene between McQueen and the always-charming Bonnie Hunt as Sally Carrera, a snappy blue Porsche with a small tattoo painted just over her rear bumper. They take a drive through picturesque red rocks, painted deserts and mountain vistas. And then they drive some more. I started worrying about gas consumption. Worse, I wondered if I'd stumbled into a travelogue of the Great Southwest. By this time, the children in the theater were running up and down the aisles, screaming for more candy. I was tempted to scream right along with them.

In an interview posted on darkhorizons.com, director Lasseter spoke about his inspiration for "Cars": that he'd piled all his family into a motorhome and took two months off with no plan.

"I got back from that journey and I had changed, and I said--cause I knew I was doing a movie about cars as a character, but I didn't really know the story ... finally, I said, 'That's what I want the story to be about, what I just learned,' that the main character learns 'the journey in life is a reward' about living kind of each day."

Swell for him, but I'm not giving anyone two months. Two hours of slow meandering was more than enough for me. Let's just stop, ask for directions, and get back on the road so we can get to where we're going, OK?

Though the pace often felt like 20 mph in the fast lane, the film was not without its charm. Larry the Cable Guy lent best bud Mater a loveable personality - Mater's two buck teeth should be up for an award all by themselves. Each character's car grill, each moving mouth were individual masterpieces. Cameos were priceless, with Tom and Ray from NPR's "Car Talk," Jay Leno, Arnold Schwarzenegger and figures from the sports world including Bob Costas, Mario Andretti, Dale Earnhardt, Jr. and Michael Schumacher.

Taking four years to create this kind of animated work is stunning, and much credit is due to Pixar's filmmakers for all the intricate detail they poured into the project. I only wish that the team had been a little less in love with every frame. If they'd been tougher on themselves, tightening the writing and the editing, then perhaps "Cars" could have been the star vehicle of the summer instead of just another pleasant drive in the country on Sunday, forgotten by Monday.

Grading this movie on a deadman's curve: B-

Production Credits:

"Cars"

Directed by John Lasseter.

Screenplay by Dan Fogelman, Philip Loren, Kiel Murray.

Story by Jorgen Klubien and Joe Ranft.

Voice Talents: Paul Newman, Owen Wilson, Bonnie Hunt, "Larry the Cable Guy," Cheech Marin, George Carlin, Michael Keaton, Tony Shalhoub, Jenifer Lewis. Rated: G

Running Time: 116 minutes