

DVD Select: Steve Carell a Noah-it-all in 'Evan Almighty'

by Robert_J_Hawkins

I think the Steve Carell sequel "Evan Almighty" (Universal, 2 stars) has exhausted the commercial and creative spin-off possibilities of the modestly ambitious Jim Carrey comedy "Bruce Almighty." So, if there is a God - and I'm pretty sure there is - there will not be a sequel starring Wanda Sykes (who plays Congressional office manager Rita Daniels) called "Rita Almighty."

'EVAN ALMIGHTY' - Steve Carell portrays a newly elected lawmaker who gets a message from God in the comedy 'Evan Almighty.' CNS Photo courtesy of Ralph Nelson. 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 Although, let's not underestimate compulsive drive for mediocrity that inspires so much of Hollywood.

And now that I think of it, the George Burns-as-God-thing got milked for a couple of sequels and - Oh, God - a remake is scheduled for 2008.

Wanda, baby, this may be your moment.

In this sequel, the ambitious TV news dog Evan Baxter (Carell) has most improbably run for Congress and won - although I can't imagine even a Fox Network affiliate allowing its anchor to keep his seat at the news desk while running for political office.

In a weak moment, Baxter prays to God to help keep his family (wife Lauren Graham and three classic Hollywood sons) together as his new life begins.

God (Morgan Freeman, of course) answers in his own unique way, commanding the new Congressman to build an ark - just like Noah's - and fill it with pairs of animals. (Now, if you watch the movie, notice two things: 1. Perhaps self-consciously, there were no visible turkeys among the animals - only in the script - and 2. There is no discernible reason to fill the ark with two of every kind of animal.)

Certainly everyone thinks the boat-building junior Congressman is crazy, but the presence of lions, tigers, bears, bison and skunks doesn't seem to disturb anyone in Washington D.C.'s corridors of power. Well, the

skunks, we understand.

As the New Yorker magazine recently pointed out, there is a discernable relationship between large boats and corrupt politicians and in this movie, the corrupt one is Rep. Chuck Long (John Goodman, in a welcome return to movies) who Randy "Duke" Cunningham-like is available to the highest paying defiler of the environment.

Long originally befriends the young politician, until the ark business arises. And when Baxter evolves into an Earth First human being, through his trials and tribulations among the animals and planks of wood, Long sneers "Good luck getting a tree to come to the polls." Harsh.

The biggest knock on "Evan Almighty" is that it feels like director Tom Shadyac ran with the first draft of the script. So much potential, so little realization of that potential. The DVD extras give you the impression that everyone involved was enamored with the construction of a cubit-for-cubit replica of Noah's ark.

Well, OK, it's nice but perhaps a few of those dollars should have poured into subsequent rewrites and honing of the script.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Surf's Up" (Sony, 3 stars) What is it with penguin movies? We were dazzled by "March of the Penguins," snickered at the satire "Farce of the Penguins," kinda liked "Happy Feet," loved the felonious quartet of penguins in "Madagascar" and didn't see it all coming back in 1995 with Don Bluth's "The Pebble and the Penguin." Now we have the little surfin' dude Cody (voiced by Shia LeBouf) entering his first pro competition, up against the formidable Tank Evans (Diedrich Bader). Cody has grown into the sport worshipping the great Big Z (Jeff Bridges) who, long-thought departed, has a lesson or two to teach the youngster about competition and the joy of surfing. Not every animated movie needs endless belly laughs - just ask the Japanese animated film wizards. And this one doesn't have a bunch. What it has is a nice story, engaging characters and nifty visuals. That's enough to make it a very good film.

"Reign Over Me" (Sony, 3 stars) New Yorker Charlie Fineman (Adam Sandler, in a very un-Sandler role) lost everything on 9/11 - his family, his job, his will to go on. Alan Johnson (Don Cheadle) is a man on the verge of losing everything from the pressures of job and family. They were once college roommates and friends. A chance encounter becomes a chance for both men to turn their lives around. Cheadle, we always knew could handle any dramatic role. But Sandler? What a pleasant surprise and what an emotionally powerful movie.

"Black Sheep" (Genius Products, 2 1/2 stars) So the way I see it, a group of wonky Kiwis were sitting around trying to come up with the most absurd zombie premise possible, and, being from New Zealand, sheep came to mind. Eventually. (I suspect they grappled with and rejected zombie penguins.) Yeah, killer sheep. Easy now, it's not a comic romp. There's gore aplenty and truly grotesque stuff from the geniuses at WETA Workshop (The "Lord of the Rings" special effects folks). There are laughs aplenty, especially when you figure out that they're poking fun at the genre, mate. Might want to turn on the English subtitles, though.

"28 Weeks Later" (Fox, 2 1/2 stars) So, it is seven weeks since the "rage" virus has burned itself out in London and the U.S. Army - there to restore order - declares the city safe for repopulation with uninfected refugees. Well, you just know that isn't going to work out. As the first sequel to "28 Days" this film has a lot to live up to and as a blood-splattering gore-fest it does well. If you are one of those people with stupid-plot-device radar, it will be going off all through the movie. Action and terror win over logic at every turn of this film.

MORE GORE

These are among the million horror-and-gore titles to be released between now and Halloween, because Hollywood truly lacks the imagination to come up with anything else: "Wrong Turn 2: Dead End," "Night of the Living Dead 3D," "Rise: Blood Hunter" and "Holla."

And finally the dark comedy "You Kill Me" (Genius Products, 2 stars) In which Ben Kingsley is a mob hitman, troubled by a drinking problem, who is sent to San Francisco to dry out. While working at a mortuary he falls in with an engaging group of characters (lead by such engaging actors as Tea Leoni, Bill Pullman and Luke Wilson). But inevitably, it's back to Buffalo and the family business, which requires a steady hand and clear eye and calm finger on the trigger.

IT CAME FROM TV

A compilation from the Disney series about a pop superstar who yearns to be a normal teen, "Hannah Montana: Life's What You Make It"; another Disney series compilation "Johnny Kapahala: Back on Board"; seasons two of "Everybody Hates Chris" and "Girlfriends"; the third season of criminal procedural "CSI:NY"; and from back in the 1980s, season two of "Family Ties."

A history lesson: Alex Haley's culture-changing 1977 mini-series "Roots" has been packaged with the sequel "Roots: The Next Generation" and the holiday movie "Roots: The Gift" in a single box set "Roots: The Complete Collection" (Warner Bros.) for under \$120. (Are you thinking Christmas? I know I'm thinking Christmas.) The set includes a new feature "Connecting with the Past," a vintage Robert Frost interview with Haley, and a new feature on the making of the series.

You don't say: Nick Park's clever clay-animation series "Creature Comforts America" in which the actual mouthings of ordinary people are given life through clay animal characters - an adaptation of his more successful British venture. Sometimes amusing, too often shallow and daft. But maybe it is just us. In the guise of clay animals, we're no easier to stomach.

Big box set of the week: All 214 episodes spanning 54 DVD discs - is that big enough for you? It is the complete "Stargate SG-1" collector's edition of the longest running sci-fi series on U.S. television. The set includes four full discs of bonus material. The price: just under \$330.

Better than a sit-com: If you get the Animal Planet channel on your cable line-up, chances are you've seen "Meerkat Manor" (season one, 13 episodes) the animal reality series featuring the South African creatures in their natural environment. All I can say is, much cuter than penguins.

FROM THE VAULTS

Back before he was a super star in the Hollywood firmament and a world class member of the diplomat

corps, Brad Pitt was just another Hollywood working hunk, paying his dues in stuff like the comedy-horror film "Cutting Class" (1989) which I'm sure he'd wish never saw daylight. Too bad diplomat-hunk.

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