

“RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 05 August 2011 01:24



You could say that the simians steal the show in RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES, except that, of course, it's their show to begin with. Die-hard fans of the classic science-fiction franchise might get their fur bristling over this franchise reboot, which puts aside the time-paradox narrative in favor of a scientific origin for the interspecies war, but most viewers will find this a surprisingly satisfying rethink of the concept.

Following Tim Burton's more direct PLANET OF THE APES remake in 2001, which grossed big but left little lasting impression, it seemed a bit of a risk to go at the concept again, this time employing the all-too-familiar catalyst of genetic engineering. After a prologue of chimpanzee capture that immediately aligns audience sympathy on the side of the animals, the story proper begins in the San Francisco labs of Gen-Sys, where Will Rodman (James Franco) is performing tests on experimental apes in hopes of finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease. Franco, whose persona tends to be that of someone too cool for science class, at first seems an odd choice to play a committed researcher, but the actor adopts the right tone of earnestness and ambition for the role. We soon learn that Will's got a particular reason to pursue his project: his father Charles (a nice turn by John Lithgow), a formerly celebrated music teacher who's lost his talent to the aforementioned affliction.



“RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 05 August 2011 01:24

Will's making real progress with his serum, especially when it comes to a chimp subject nicknamed “Bright Eyes”—one of several affectionate in-references to the original PLANET OF THE APES. (A less flattering one is that Will's greed-driven boss, Steven Jacobs—played by David Oyelowo—is evidently named after the original film series' producer Arthur P. Jacobs.) Bright Eyes is to be the centerpiece of a presentation to the project's financial backers, but in the first of several action setpieces excitingly staged by director Rupert Wyatt, she goes, well, ape, with unfortunate results. This sets in motion a series of events in which Bright Eyes' offspring, Caesar, who has inherited her altered DNA, is first raised by Will and then subjected to barbarous treatment by other humans that foment in his mind the seeds of rebellion.

Caesar thus becomes RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES' true protagonist, with lengthy stretches containing no dialogue, just increasingly human expressions conveying his burgeoning emotions and awareness. This could have become silly were it not for the remarkable and thoroughly convincing computerized creation of Caesar as well as numerous other primates, which not only forestalls criticism regarding the replacement of the previous movies' prosthetics with pixels, but makes it clear CGI was the only possible way to go with this scenario. The level of digitized realism is no surprise coming from Weta Digital and its performance capture of actor Andy Serkis, given their achievements with Gollum in the LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy and the R&D they put into KING KONG (a gorilla gets in on the action here as well).

Caesar's evolution from docile pet to guerrilla leader (sorry, couldn't resist) is dramatic, scary, tragic and fully developed within the narrative, and also dovetails with what we know from a few unfortunate recent real-life cases about how cute little chimps grow up to be unpredictable and potentially murderous beasts. Some of the supporting apes are given distinctive personalities as well, allowing for a number of entertaining interactions—but also throwing into relief the fact that the two-legged characters aren't nearly as well-developed. Will is a solid enough human lead, though the script by Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver (whose credits include THE RELIC) skirts his complicity in the downfall of humanity, and the people around him are largely one-dimensional. These include Caroline (Freida Pinto), a veterinarian by trade whose main role is to be The Girlfriend, and the villains, including Jacobs, a nasty primate-center employee played by Tom Felton (grunged-out and almost unrecognizable from his long-running part in the HARRY POTTER epics) and a jerkwad neighbor of the Rodmans.

Fortunately, Wyatt keeps the pace speeding along and the ape-human and ape-ape confrontations coherently and compellingly presented, building to a terrific, lengthy climactic fracas on a fog-shrouded Golden Gate Bridge. Having previously done the smaller but not entirely dissimilar prison-break drama THE ESCAPIST, he shows real chops for this kind of

“RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 05 August 2011 01:24

big-ticket filmmaking, and an equal skill with grace notes, as when the passage of a number of apes through the treetops is first signaled by a falling of leaves onto curious people below. His work on RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES makes you want to see the director get another big-ticket genre/action film, perhaps a continuation of this story (as teased in a mid-end-credits sequence)—one that allows as much of an emotional investment with its humans as with its apes.

