

# FILM REVIEW



## Death becomes him and her

The frenetic action in 'Wanted' barely lets up

BY LISA KENNEDY  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, DENVER



Call it mayhem interruptus. Years ago at the New York Film Festival premiere of *Pulp Fiction*, a man had what was murmured to be a heart attack during the scene in which Travolta's character revives Uma Thurman's with a shot of adrenaline to the heart. The lights went up. The paramedics came. The film resumed.

Another episode occurred at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah just as Christian Bale's *American Psycho* killer was gleefully revving a chain saw. That time the film kept rolling. Park City is a cruel place.

So it was no surprise when at a screening of *Wanted*, starring James McAvoy, Morgan Freeman and Angelina Jolie, the fire alarm began its strobing flash sending the audience into the dusk.

Something had to give. The action had reached a fevered pitch in Timur Bekmambetov's bold rendering of Mark Millar and J.G. Jones' graphic novel series about a loser who begins to know himself when he is recruited by a secret society of assassins whose day job is weaving.

For hundreds of years, the Fraternity's Loom of Fate has spun a code that names its next targets: people who sow chaos.

A chase on a train had ended with the cars tumbling down a gorge, one hanging wedged between rocky walls as two assassins come face to bloodied face.

While not a good thing, the break wasn't entirely bad either.

Catching the final two reels a few days later allowed me to ponder anew the admirable and the aggravating in the Russian-Kazakh director's first English-language film: the cast, the craft

<i>Film Notes</i>
<b>WANTED</b>
<b>DIRECTED BY:</b> TIMUR BEKMAMBEV
<b>STARRING:</b> JAMES MCAVOY (WESLEY GIBSON), MORGAN FREEMAN (SLOAN), ANGELINA JOLIE (FOX), TERENCE STAMP (PEKWASKY)
<b>RUNNING TIME:</b> 110 MINUTES
<b>TAIWAN RELEASE:</b> ON GENERAL RELEASE

versus the exhausting gunslinging as character development.

Wesley Gibson (McAvoy) downs anti-anxiety pills and hunkers down in his Chicago office cubicle trying to avoid his harpy of a boss. He's aware that his best friend is shagging his girlfriend.

As the movie is fond of declaring, Wesley is a wuss.

OK, that's not quite the word screenwriters Michael Brandt, Derek Haas and Chris Morgan use to describe weakness in a flick that earned a "Restricted" rating in the US, but you get the point.

His inner voice is much angrier than his pasty-patsy demeanor lets on. *Wanted* begins with Wesley's voice-over, which is mighty contemptuous for a guy who is acutely aware of the lameness of his existence. But one thing it tells us is that his father abandoned him when he was an infant.

So when a woman named Fox (Jolie) arrives to tell Wesley that his father — "the world's

greatest assassin" — has just been killed (a death we witness), it comes as something of a shocking cosmic joke.

Only there's no time for laughing. A Fraternity renegade named Cross (Thomas Kretschmann) intends to kill Wesley, as he did his father, and destroy the Fraternity.

In Wesley's case, the D in DNA means "deadly." He has the rare ability to bend the trajectory of bullets at will. And so he's taken to the Fraternity's compound, a working textile factory, to train to become the killer of his father's killer.

Jolie often appears to be exorcising some demons when she takes roles that require she do physical damage. Here she does plenty. More devouring than sly, Fox is a she-wolf. Yet she pulls off the most surprising and touching scene in a movie that is 99 and 44/100 percent violent.

*Wanted* is all about over-the-top.

Bekmambetov made two of Russia's biggest box-office hits, *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*. As in those films, he's too willing to sacrifice story sense and emotion for a frenetic ride. The script will likely please the graphic novels' fans. But the filmmaker misses an opportunity to deepen the existential aches implied in the material.

As the Scottish actor McAvoy makes his way through the demolished textile factory, with its busted looms and unraveled spindles, the wisdom of a different Scott comes to mind: Sir Walter, to be precise.

"Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive." It's a lesson brutally learned.

After going on this white-knuckle ride, audiences may feel like a lie down.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UP

## The last robot standing

Andrew Stanton, the human behind 'Finding Nemo,' brings robot WALL-E to life. The film's mix of technology and spirit of silent films is a brilliant move by Pixar

BY LISA KENNEDY

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The wee cube of a hero at the heart of *WALL-E* has military binoculars for eyes, tank treads for feet and metallic hands he interlocks in a pantomime of what it might be like to grasp another's hand.

It's a gesture that came to him as he watched a loop of an old movie in which two lovers sing *It Only Takes a Moment*.

WALL-E, a robot with a fondness for Jerry Herman's *Hello, Dolly*, is the child of the brainiacs at Pixar. In particular: Andrew Stanton.

In 2003, audiences, and later the Oscars, reacted swimmingly to the writer-director's fish tale, *Finding Nemo*.

Today, Stanton returns as a director and co-writer. And what a difference five years make. Rather, what a difference 800 years into the future make.

Instead of undulating ocean, *WALL-E* opens onto a desolate, beige Earthscape of trash piled as high as skyscrapers. This weird new world isn't teeming with clown

fish, turtles and sharks trying to turn over new dorsal fins. Instead, it's occupied by one lone Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class and his pal Hal, a cockroach.

A kids' movie dystopian Philip K. Dick might give a thumbs-up to.

"It's one of those things that when you think about it, you could convince yourself not to go there," says Stanton. "But the reason he's so charming is because he's the last robot on Earth. You can't have that and separate out the dystopian. You can lessen it or soften it. But you can't get rid of it. That's part of why you like him. It was very intentional to push the envelope."

Turns out the evocation of cult-fave author Dick isn't such a reach. Dick wrote the story that became *Blade Runner*, one of the movies that influenced Stanton's interest in science fiction. Add to the list: *Star Wars*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Alien*, as well as more fan fare such as 1972's *Silent Running*.

"Those were my formative movie-going years, 1962 to 82," says Stanton, who was born and raised in the small town of

Rockport, Massachusetts.

"What a lift. You almost got to the point where you believed you were guaranteed something like that every year. I don't know if I got older or it really changed, but by the late 80s going into the 90s, they were few and far between, movies in the sci-fi genre packed with that kind of wonder and awe."

Hence the homages like the name of WALL-E's companion. HAL was the computer in Stanley Kubrick's *2001*. (Stanton's next project is *John Carter of Mars*.)

Stanton lets out a guffaw when asked if Pixar is on a mission to make the world right for pests with movies like his and last summer's rodent-infested *Ratatouille*.

"I don't think that's an agenda. But definitely as an animator, you're always wondering, 'Can I make you like this?' People always say, 'Oh, you modeled him so cute.' And we say, 'No, actually, we modeled him to look like a real cockroach.' I think it's because of how WALL-E sees him as a pet and how we animate him, how he moves."

A greater nod to those halcyon



Chief Creative Officer of Disney and Pixar Animation Studios John Lasseter, left, and Andrew Stanton, director of Disney-Pixar's film *WALL-E*.

PHOTO: REUTERS

<i>Film Notes</i>
<b>WALL-E</b>
<b>DIRECTED BY:</b> ANDREW STANTON
<b>STARRING:</b> BEN BURTT (WALL-E), ELISSA KNIGHT (EVE), JEFF GARLIN (CAPTAIN), FRED WILLARD (SHELBY FORTHRIGHT, BNL CEO), MACINTALK (AUTO), JOHN RATZENBERGER (JOHN), KATHY NAJIMY (MARY), SIGOURNEY WEAVER (SHIP'S COMPUTER)
<b>RUNNING TIME:</b> 98 MINUTES
<b>TAIWAN RELEASE:</b> TODAY

sci-fi flick years came when Stanton and company brought in Ben Burtt to create the sounds of *WALL-E*. The Academy Award-winning sound designer famously gave voice — or the 'bot equivalent — to R2D2 of *Star Wars*.

"What I discovered on *Star Wars* with R2D2 was you want to create the illusion that a machine is talking, that it has a

personality," says Burtt.

"The conflict is always, how much of this character is going to be made from a human input and how much of it is going to be a result of some electrical process, some synthesis, something only a machine could do?" he adds.

The mixture is vital. "On the one hand, it has to have enough machine that you believe it was created by technology. But there has to be enough of the human element so you detect the character has a full range of emotions and intelligence, in a sense, has a soul you care about."

And we do. Love-struck WALL-E's whirrs and ahs are as recognizable emotionally as our own sighs and harrumphs. When sleek, ultra-tech robot EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) arrives on the scene, WALL-E is smitten. So much so, he follows her into space, where her hefty human programmers have lived on cruise-style spaceships for centuries.

Stanton admits the little machine who takes his love pangs

to infinity and beyond had been clanking around Pixar for years. But he says they weren't sure they were up to the challenge.

"Honestly, I have said this and it's true: I'm glad it didn't get made till now."

The technology is much improved. And Pixar's finest — John Lasseter, Brad Bird, Pete Docter among them — have gotten better too. And, adds Stanton, the ninth employee and second animator hired by a fledgling company that became one of the most successful enterprises in moviedom, "There's the trust we compounded in the bank with the audience."

On a personal level, *Finding Nemo* was a turning point, says the filmmaker. "I remember being so blown away by the response ... As an artist it made me start to trust the little voice in me that battled obstacles to get certain things made in that film. It made me want to listen to that voice."

What did it say?

"I want to try that weird little robot movie."