



A must-see 'Museum'

Hundreds of exhibits spring to life in 'Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian,' making New York's Museum of Natural History in the original Ben Stiller comedy look like a high school science fair

BY STEVE PERSALL
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When the roll call of best sequels ever is read, *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* should rank pretty high on the list. This is the movie director Shawn Levy should've made the

first time around. Everything is bigger, livelier and downright better than 2006's *Night at the Museum*, which was a great idea sunk by limitations of budget and imagination. Both are in order this time, after the first movie's box office bonanza. But what also makes *Battle of the Smithsonian* more fun is what Levy took out.

Gone is the paternal conflict padding that forced Larry Daley (Ben Stiller) to take a job as a night watchman in New York's Museum of Natural History, where exhibits magically come alive after sundown. Robin Williams' riffing as Teddy Roosevelt is mercifully reduced, and there's no subplot about aging watchmen in survival mode. Anything that grounded or distracted *Night at the Museum* is gone and never missed.

Instead, the plot promptly zips to Washington, where much of the New York museum's outdated exhibits are being banished to deep storage in Smithsonian vaults. Since this is the world's largest museum, Levy has millions of items and artifacts to enliven, from the Wright brothers' airplane to Albert Einstein bobblehead dolls. The former leads to an exciting and romantic action sequence while the latter offer scene-stealing comedy.

This time, the plot revolves around the mystical

Film Notes

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: BATTLE OF THE SMITHSONIAN

DIRECTED BY: SHAWN LEVY

STARRING: BEN STILLER (LARRY DALEY), AMY ADAMS (AMELIA EARHART), OWEN WILSON (JEDIDIAH SMITH), HANK AZARIA (KAHMUNRAH/THE THINKER/ABE LINCOLN), ROBIN WILLIAMS (TEDDY ROOSEVELT), CHRISTOPHER GUEST (IVAN THE TERRIBLE), ALAIN CHABAT (NAPOLEON BONAPARTE), STEVE COOGAN (OCTAVIUS)

RUNNING TIME: 105 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: CURRENTLY SHOWING

golden tablet of Ahkmunrah causing all this commotion. His brother Kalmunrah (Hank Azaria, sporting a Boris Karloff lisp) wants the tablet to unleash his Army of the Dead and conquer the world with his accomplices: Ivan the Terrible (Christopher Guest), Napoleon Bonaparte (Alain Chabat) and Al Capone (Jon Bernthal).

That hardly seems like a fair fight since Larry's

With a bigger budget than the first outing, director Shawn Levy could afford to pull out all the stops for *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX

comrades are either miniature (Owen Wilson and Steve Coogan reprising their roles), deluded lunatics (Bill Hader as General George Armstrong Custer) or Neanderthals. *Battle of the Smithsonian* awakens statues, paintings and the nearby Lincoln Memorial, and an escape into *Life* magazine's 1945 photo of a sailor kissing a nurse on VJ Day is a brilliant, monochromatic move. Even inanimate objects are mined for laughs; Kalmunrah cooing about the comfort of Archie Bunker's easy chair "throne" is madcap genius.

Don't think that *Battle of the Smithsonian* is merely computer-generated eye candy. Emotional issues are handled with care: Larry's success as an inventor has taken a personal toll, a distinct lack of "moxie," as the rejuvenated aviatrix Amelia Earhart (Amy Adams, irresistibly spunky) says in 1920s hagspeak. Larry's tentative romance with Amelia, as opposed to his divorced moping in the original, is a welcomed addition.

Battle of the Smithsonian is a delightful summer diversion, perfect for families and absurdly smart enough for anyone else. Or perhaps you don't think Larry using a "cube of Rubik" as a ploy to outwit Kalmunrah, or a chorus of cherubs voiced by the Jonas Brothers is funny. That's your loss.

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Last House on the Left

Two girlfriends accept an offer of some dope from a teenager and end up abducted and brutalized — and worse. In a twist lifted from Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring*, the attackers inadvertently end up in the home of one of the victims and every circle of hell breaks loose when the parents discover who they are. If this remake of an American exploitation classic had aimed for the same impact today as Wes Craven's original in the early 1970s, we would have to sit through a nauseating marathon of rape, molestation, torture and murder. So credit this version from co-producer Craven and director Dennis Iliadis for taking its characters more seriously. But it's still too brutal for most tastes, especially the coda, which might remind alert viewers of Takashi Miike's *Audition*. Marketing trivia: The trailer makes splendid use of a *Taken by Trees* cover of *Sweet Child O' Mine*, while the Taiwanese distributor (Universal), in a cute advertising ploy, calls the *remake* one of the 10 most banned films in history — a clever deception, given that its target audience wasn't born when Craven's drive-in opus came out and probably know nothing of it or its notoriety.



God's Puzzle

Now here's some real Takashi Miike. Japan's prolific maverick director had a fairly quiet 2008, directing a TV series and this very strange feature, in which theories of physics and catastrophe frame a philosophical adventure of sorts, together with helpings of comedy and a bit of romance. A twin fills in for his brother and convinces a female prodigy to share her talents in building a doomsday machine. Something for everyone, it appears, yet despite all this, *Variety* called this film "Miike's most conventional pic" — but still entertaining.



Twentieth Century Boys: Chapter Two — The Last Hope

More manga action and drama as the mysterious, masked cult leader from the first film consolidates his power and leads the world (well, Japan) toward total disaster. Set in 2015, our heroes from the first film are tasked with stopping this train of events, though critics wondered if the compression of masses of manga source material into a two-hour-plus exposition wouldn't get in their way. Perhaps naive in places, the imagery remains quite potent, and the sense of dread and powerlessness seems better suited now to Asian countries struggling with their economies. Part 3 opens in Japan in August.



Happy Flight

Made with the blessing and assistance of Japan's All-Nippon Airways, this is an ensemble melodrama that starts with a run-through of the aviation industry and ends with an *Airport*-style drama on a plane forced to return to Tokyo despite an approaching typhoon. Viewers suspicious at the idea of a potential disaster movie *supported* by a real airline may find themselves surprised at the entertainment on offer as a wide range of characters spice up proceedings aboard the craft and back on the ground.



The Gig 2

Part 1 of this romantic comedy series from Thailand screened at Ximending's Baixue theater in January; this 2007 sequel is at the same theater, and carries the same payload of klutzy young men chasing a bunch of young women who spend a good chunk of time talking the nonsense that such films require. More corny than raunchy, despite the *American Pie* references, and contains enough "gay panic" and fat jokes to remind the viewer that not all Thai youngsters prefer to see homosexual hit men and rotund ladyboy ghosts on the big screen. Also known as *Gig Number Two*.



Down and out in Hong Kong

In 'True Women for Sale,' veteran director Herman Yau tackles the plight of sex workers and Chinese immigrants

BY HO YI

STAFF REPORTER

After his 2007 movie *Whispers and Moans* (性工作者十日談), which shone the spotlight on Hong Kong's sex industry, veteran filmmaker Herman Yau (伊禮謙) focuses on a similar theme in *True Women for Sale* (我不賣身, 我賣子宮), a movie that addresses marginalized members of society. The film tackles serious social issues — the plight of immigrants and sex workers — with warmhearted humor and a sense of humanity.

Set in 2000, the film opens with life insurance salesman Lau Fu-ji (Anthony Wong, 黃秋生) delivering a meager payout to the widowed Wong Lin-fa (Race Wong, 黃婉伶), a young Chinese mother of one daughter who is pregnant with twins. Wong views her unborn children as a ticket to permanent residency in Hong Kong despite the fact that she is barely able to raise her first child in the seedy Hong Kong neighborhood

she inhabits alongside a cast of disreputable characters. One such neighbor Lin-fa looks down on is longtime junkie and street prostitute Chung (Prudence Liew, 劉美君), who is set on earning extra cash to fix her teeth.

Meanwhile, photographer Chi (Sammy Leung, 森美) thinks that Chung would make a suitable subject for a human-interest story and sets about unearthing the 39-year-old hooker's life story.

By casting a local sex worker and a Chinese immigrant as the lead protagonists, Yau effectively highlights the body as a political field that is monitored and disciplined by the state through the police and social workers, yet that is at the same time used by women as a means for political, financial and social gain.

The media frenzy caused when Lin-fa gives birth on a bus earns her residency, a happenstance that

Film Notes

TRUE WOMEN FOR SALE (我不賣身, 我賣子宮)

DIRECTED BY: HERMAN YAU (伊禮謙)

STARRING: PRUDENCE LIEW (劉美君) AS CHUNG, ANTHONY WONG (黃秋生) AS LAU FU-JI, RACE WONG (黃婉伶) AS WONG LIN-FA, SAMMY LEUNG (森美) AS CHI

LANGUAGE: IN CANTONESE WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 90 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

contrasts with the press coverage afforded street demonstrations by Chinese immigrants.

Yau shows his directorial dexterity by weaving together the two seemingly unrelated stories without forcing congruity. The film, though, is not without its moments of sentimentality and

cliche, and its lighthearted portraits of working-class characters and predictably happy ending seem aimed at mainstream audiences.

The characters are realistically portrayed and handled with affection. Malaysian-born Race Wong delivers a natural performance as a Chinese immigrant who is forced

to become selfish, loud and difficult in order to protect her family in a hostile environment. Accomplished thespian Anthony Wong handles his salesman character with ease, punctuating the story with moments of good-natured humor.

The star of the film, however, is Hong Kong's veteran singer and actress Liew, who returns to the big screen after more than a decade-long hiatus. She is precise in her portrait of the eccentric lady of the night, who is at the same time both innocent and worn out by life, but who also manages to maintain faith in people. Her performance saves the film from becoming a tearjerker at its most maudlin moments.

The Chinese doctor played by Taiwan's Jessey Meng (孟廣美), on the other hand, is a lifeless symbol of China, a proud, alluring and dangerous object of desire in the eyes of Hong Kong businessmen like Anthony Wong's character.



Above: Anthony Wong injects a little humor into an otherwise grinding tale of marginalization.

Right: Prudence Liew won the Best Leading Actress award for her role in *True Women for Sale* at last year's Golden Horse Awards.

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