

FILM REVIEW



With a heartfelt storyline and humorous dialogue, this dragon-themed 3D animation has soul

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

It is in 3D and features flying dragons. And no, it is not *Avatar*... in the best possible way. *How to Train Your Dragon* harks back to the glory days of production company DreamWorks' first *Shrek* (2001) movie, with its light touch and assured handling of fantasy themes in a way that neither condescends to children or insults the intelligence of adult audiences.

The new 3D technology that has come into the world with such fanfare in *Avatar* is clearly going to ensure many more movies with flying creatures swooping about weird and wonderful landscapes. The gimmick of having any and everything on screen being thrown toward the audience for cheap 3D thrills is already a thing of the past, and the most appealing thing about its presence in *How to Train Your Dragon* is that you quite quickly can forget about it and get on with enjoying the story. 3D might provide a more immersing visual experience, but it is definitely not enough to make up for the lack of a good story.

Like the best of these high-tech animation features, there is a good solid story at the center of *How to Train Your Dragon*. That the storyline works is really no surprise, for

this is a narrative that has been evolving over thousands of years and is rooted in the great myths of ancient civilization.

Weakening child is an outsider in his own community. He discovers a magical item, in this case a dragon, and through ingenuity rather than strength, learns to harness its power. He returns to his community to lead them to victory against a great threat, wins the girl and becomes a great king.

What the team at DreamWorks has done is given this ancient structure a contemporary gloss, thrown in some witty dialogue, referenced some contemporary issues, created some instantly recognizable character types (which incidentally are tailor-made for merchandising) and then let the visual spectacle and breakneck pace take care of the rest.

The story is set in a "Viking" community — though oddly enough, these Vikings all seem to speak some species of Scottish. The community is isolated, the weather is vile, and it is constantly attacked by dragons. Everyone is a warrior, except Hiccup, the weakening son of the clan chief.

In his effort to become a dragon killer, Hiccup accidentally captures one of the most

fearsome types of dragon. The fact that this dragon is modeled after the character of Stitch from *Lilo and Stitch* (2002) and is more cute than fearsome is clearly intentional, allowing the film to appeal to a younger demographic than say something like *Eragon* (2006), with which it shares some superficial dragon-tamer themes.

Hiccup's father is Stoick, a huge warrior who is committed to defending his people from the dragons and is not a little ashamed of his son. He is voiced by Gerard Butler, who does himself considerably more credit as a voice artist behind a lovingly created animated character than he does as an actor in *The Bounty Hunter*, which also opens today.

The relationship between father and son is deftly handled, as is the love interest between Hiccup and the leggy Astrid, who wants nothing better than to beat the boys at the dragon-fighting game. She wants to be a warrior, and is more than a little put off by Hiccup's wimpy ways with dragons, as he learns to calm them rather than kill them. Other children characters include the cowardly and narcissistic jock Snotlout, the offish Fishlegs, who has the specifications of each species of dragon at his

Film Notes

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

DIRECTED BY:
DEAN DEBLOISE AND CHRIS SANDERS

STARRING:
JAY BARUCHEL (HICCUP), GERARD BUTLER (STOICK), CRAIG FERGUSON (GOBBER), AMERICA FERRERA (ASTRID), JONAH HILL (SNOTLOUT), CHRISTOPHER MINTZ-PLASSE (FISHLEGS), T.J. MILLER (TUFFNUT), KRISTEN WIIG (RUFFNUT)

RUNNING TIME:
98 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

fingertips (gamer style), and the constantly bickering twins Tuffnut and Ruffnut.

The various species of dragon reflect various human characteristics as well, playing off the personality of the young Vikings, who all, not unexpectedly, eventually turn into dragon riders.

It could all be just another by-the-numbers high-tech animation, but *How to Train Your Dragon* has heart. Like most good children's stories, it is full of life lessons, but these are embedded in the story in such a way as to say "you can take it or leave it." This too can be said of the 3D, which the animators have clearly enjoyed playing with, but which is never forced down your throat.

How to Train Your Dragon will also be released in a Chinese-language version featuring the voices of actor Chen Han-tien (陳漢典) and pop singer Amber Kuo (郭采潔) as Hiccup and Astrid, respectively. Chen played a minor gangster in the recent Taiwan film *Monga* (麻輝), and local media have suggested that he had not completely shed his role before heading to the recording studio to dub *How to Train Your Dragon*, making Hiccup sound a little too much like a Taipei street punk.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Thomas and Friends: Hero of the Rails

Thomas the Tank engine is going to have a very tough time against this week's big release *How to Train Your Dragon*, and is likely to appeal only to the very, very young. Little seems to have been done to upgrade the presentation from its action model animation television incarnation. The main difference is that while it features Michael Brandon, one of the TV program's original US narrators, there are other voices as well, providing a more dramatic quality. This is something that the venerable program, which dates back to 1984, is only just beginning to do now in its 13th series, for which *Hero of the Rails* seems to be little more than a big-screen teaser.



Bandage (Bandeiji)

Japanese teen music flick that harks back to the music scene of the 1990s when forming a band was, supposedly, every young Japanese student's dream. The film is a directing debut for Takeshi Kobayashi, primarily a composer with credits that include the score for the minor 2001 hit *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (Riri Shushu no subete) and contributions to *Kill Bill Vol. 1*. The film was adapted for the screen by Shunji Iwai, who may be known to Western audiences through this participation as a director in last year's cinematic collage *New York, I Love You*. *Bandage* follows the life of Asako and Miharu who, looking for a way out from problems at home, ingratiate themselves into an indie-rock band. Romance and rousing rock numbers follow.



Gambling Apocalypse Kaiji (Kaiji: Jinsei Gyakuten Gemu)

There seems to be no end to *manga* adaptations coming out of Japan, though this one seems sillier than most, despite some credibility deriving from star Tatsuya Fujiwara, who featured in past *manga* classics such as *Death Note* (2006). This time Fujiwara is salaryman Kaiji who is offered the ultimate chance to escape his dead-end existence at the gambling table. The risks for losing are no less than an eternity of torment. The original comic books aim at some deep social commentary about how a plutocracy keeps the common man enslaved, but this theme seems to have rather lost out to some entertaining gambling set pieces in which the fates of the lead characters are decided.



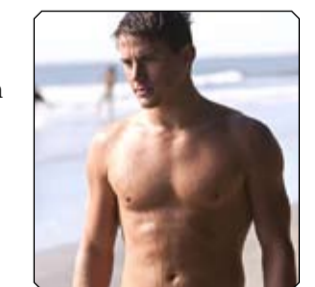
Remember Me

Romantic drama that might be described as Greek tragedy for the tween generation. It stars Robert Pattinson, who is making a foray out from the world of the undead (just before his *Twilight* persona gets another airing in *Eclipse*, the third segment of that saga), who is doing his best to look dissipated if very much alive. Individual performances, particularly that of Pierce Brosnan, have received praise from no less a source than Roger Ebert, but even this most gracious of critics accepts that there is good reason for the hailstorm of one-star or less reviews across the media at what is variously regarded as a movie that is adolescent, contrived, tasteless, or all three. The harshness of the critical response almost makes this film worth a peek.



Dear John

Another movie about love and war that ultimately has not much to do with either, *Dear John* is a romantic drama about the transcendent potential of the human soul to overcome loss and people's ability to act in noble ways with the aid of pre-written dialogue. Based on a novel by Nicholas Sparks, who is also responsible for the books *Message in a Bottle* (1999) and *The Notebook* (2004), both of which were turned into films, *Dear John* exists in a world that real people rarely ever visit. There are beautiful people, in this case Channing Tatum and Amanda Seyfried, who fall in love, and then find that topical issues, 9/11 and Asperger syndrome in this case, pull them apart. They rise to the challenge. An inoffensive way of getting through a box of tissues.



Sagan

French biopic of the writer Francoise Sagan, with a heavy dose of romantic sorrow. Sagan wrote a number of hugely influential books, starting out with *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) when she was just 18, the first of many works that served as a clarion call to disillusioned teens. Her story should be interesting, for Sagan parleyed her early literary success into an introduction to the literary elite of the French and English-speaking intellectual worlds, consorting with the likes of Sartre and Capote. Although directed and co-written by Diane Kurys, who has a reputation for the insightful portrayal of women's lives, *Sagan* seems to have little to say about the celebrity author despite a strong performance by Sylvie Testud in the title role.



FILM REVIEW

A bumpy road to reconciliation

In a battle of the exes, the punches are pulled

BY A.O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

At the beginning of *The Bounty Hunter*, Nicole and Milo — she's a reporter for the *Daily News*, played by Jennifer Aniston; he's a former New York City police officer, played by Gerard Butler, who now plies the unglamorous trade that gives the movie its name — are divorced. It is obvious enough that this condition will reverse itself by the end, but it would have been better for everybody concerned, the audience most of all, if they had just stayed split.

On the bumpy road to reconciliation the once and future spouses fight, squabble and slap handcuffs on each other, and also scamper across New Jersey on the run from several different groups of murderous thugs. What they do not do is give the slightest indication that they belong together, except by virtue of having signed contracts to appear in this movie.

Back in the old days, when our grandparents were courting, the volatile magnetism of heterosexual monogamy — the power of men and women to attract and repel each other in equal measure — was the motor that got many a screwball comedy rolling. Remember *His Girl Friday*? *Bringing Up Baby*? *Holiday*? (If not, it's never too late.) *The Bounty Hunter*, with its whirligig plot and incessant squabbling, shows some genetic connection to those sparkingly silly battles of the sexes. But it is also the

latest evidence that, when it comes to romantic combat, we live in a more coddled, a less insouciant and also a more thoughtlessly brutal age than our ancestors did.

In spite of Butler's grumping and harrumphing, and Aniston's foot-stamping displays of irritation, the emotions in the movie are carefully circumscribed. There is a risk of homicide, but not of hurt feelings.

This is because characters whose feelings are supposed to be at stake are blunted, dumbed-down caricatures of notional human beings, rather than sharply etched epitomes of human behavior. Milo and Nicole broke up because she was too attached to her career, but while Aniston is able to give a reasonable impression of a person doing a job, Butler seems fundamentally incapable of giving any impression beyond that of a self-absorbed boor just awakened from a nap.

When Milo receives the assignment to bring Nicole to jail — she has skipped out on bail after an off-camera traffic incident of some kind — he reacts with glee. He'll be able to humiliate his ex-wife and also collect a paycheck. What more could a man ask for?

But his joy is off-putting because it seems unmotivated. You spend the next 100 minutes or so waiting either for something to happen that would explain the intensity of Milo's animus or allow him to show a warm, tender or even moderately appealing side.

Film Notes

THE BOUNTY HUNTER

DIRECTED BY:
ANDY TENNANT

STARRING:
JENNIFER ANISTON (NICOLE HURLEY), GERARD BUTLER (MILO BOYD), CHRISTINA BARANSKI (KITTY HURLEY) AND JASON SUDEIKIS (STEWART)

RUNNING TIME:
106 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

What did I miss? Yes, he lights some candles and shows an occasional hint of gallantry under duress. But neither Milo nor Nicole succeeds in being very interesting, and while Aniston can fall back on her easy, nicely worn charm, Butler has only the opposite of charm to work with. His charisma is aggressively negative: a petulant, sneering, bullying disregard for other people (and for his own hygiene) that is meant, I guess, to represent a kind of rough-hewn, politically incorrect masculine honesty.

Do women go for this kind of thing? Well, *The Ugly Truth*, with Butler starring opposite Katherine



Heigl, was a big hit. I suspect, though, that his character in that movie and in this one, directed by Andy Tennant (*Hitch*, *Fool's Gold*) from a script by Sarah Thorp, is meant to offer comfort to the panicky men in the audience, who can be reassured that it's OK to act like a jerk, and that in any case this guy is a bigger jerk than any of the rest of us could ever hope to be.

But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe shaving, tucking in your shirt or displaying good manners is just sissy stuff. And the violence of *The Bounty Hunter* is there to dispel any hint of effeminate gentleness. The action-movie elements of the plot are not worth going into — Nicole is after a big story that rubs one set of baddies the wrong way, while Milo's gambling debts summon a different set of heavies — but they provide both a degree of momentum and an excuse for glowering displays of aggression. It's all kept carefully within

comic bounds, sort of. The sex is tame, which is to say that there is not any to speak of. (You'd think those handcuffs would at least raise a mildly kinky frisson when connecting Aniston to a bed frame, but they don't.) But the bloodshed produces an undercurrent of ugliness that the strenuously jokey high spirits cannot dissolve.

Consider the fate of a minor character named Stewart (Jason Sudeikis), a fellow whose skinny mustache and pastel clothes mark him as a loser, and who insists on believing that he has a chance with Nicole because she kissed him once at an office party. You expect him to be a comic punching bag, but for his sins poor Stewart is kidnapped, tortured and shot up with horse tranquilizer after his leg is broken. It's disturbing, and somewhat baffling too, until you grasp that this hapless sucker is a surrogate for the audience.