

FILM REVIEW



Peril and politics

Childlike robot Astro Boy has his work cut out for him in this computer-animated feature, which starts from the beginning as he discovers his powers and love for his scientist 'father' and ends with combat against evil forces and hostile robots

BY STEVE PERSALL
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, ST PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Dr Evil's Frisch's Big Boy rocket ship! No, it's only Astro Boy, another Japanese anime hero with fans in high enough Hollywood places to get an Americanized movie version made. Didn't they learn anything from *Speed Racer*? Well, maybe that it's wiser to animate cartoons rather than turn flesh and blood actors into them.

Astro Boy is the holy grail of anime, created by Osamu Tezuka in the 1950s as a manga comic book then turned into a 1960s TV series, inventing the Japanese animation genre. I know that only because I looked it up on Wikipedia, which isn't entirely reliable, but anime cultists won't stand for misinformation. Such obsessives are the best audience for *Astro Boy* while masses already gorged on better 'toons this year shrug it off.

The setup is a high-tech reverse take on *Pinocchio*, with a precocious boy named Toby (voice of Freddie Highmore) dying in a laboratory accident and then being reincarnated as a robot by his scientist father (Nicolas Cage). Although uploaded with Toby's memories and

personality plus weaponry, Dad rejects the replacement.

Astro Boy, as he's called, becomes a wanted robot, hunted by a hawkish president (Donald Sutherland) for use as a weapon of mass destruction. Any resemblance to a former US president isn't coincidental, along with the fact that robot power sources are either blue (good guys) or red (bad guys), like states on election day. Political allegory is a staple of anime but seldom so heavy-handed.

Astro Boy escapes from floating Metro City to Earth below, a wasteland of refuse that WALL-E couldn't clean up. Earth is where only the poorest humans live, including a juvenile gang scavenging parts for Hamegg (Nathan Lane) to assemble and sell as rock 'em, sock 'em robots. Eventually all of these issues converge in an admittedly spectacular climax. Getting there is the rub.

Director and co-writer David Bowers (*Flushed Away*) lovingly crafts a kinetic tribute to Tezuka's source material, filled with whooshing action and finely detailed backgrounds. But even though

this is Astro Boy's screen debut, each character and situation seems familiar from other movies, as if *The Iron Giant*, *Monsters vs Aliens* and *Robots* already bled Tezuka's legacy dry.

Film Notes

ASTRO BOY

DIRECTOR:
DAVID BOWERS

WITH THE VOICES OF:
KRISTEN BELL (CORA), NICOLAS CAGE (DR TENMA), SAMUEL L. JACKSON (ZOG), BILL NIGHY (DR ELEFUNK), DONALD SUTHERLAND (GENERAL STONE)

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

RUNNING TIME:
94 MINUTES

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

E. SHA Age (藝霞年代)

The only Taiwanese release for this week is a documentary that looks back at — and recreates — the exploits of the famed E. SHA song and dance troupe, which folded in 1984 after more than two decades of performances and international tours. This is a real trip down memory lane for older viewers; younger folks smitten with boy and girl band ephemera could do worse than check out what their parents and grandparents were enjoying at a difficult time in Taiwan's history. Screening at Cinema 7 (絕色影城) in Ximending, the Sun theater (日新大戲院) in Taichung and the Vieshow complex in Tainan from today, then at the Vieshow complex in Kaohsiung from next Friday.



Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky

Within a matter of weeks, out comes another film about Coco Chanel. This one delves not into her rise to the top ranks of the fashion world, but with her subsequent affair with the famed (and married) composer. Unlike *Coco Before Chanel*, this one is liberally spiced with sex scenes as the scheming Coco gets her man. The rather unsympathetic Stravinsky is played by Mads Mikkelsen, who was simply perfect as James Bond's gambling, bleeding-eye foe in *Casino Royale*.



Kitaro the Movie: Japan Explodes!! PLUS Digimon Savers the Movie: Ultimate Power! Activate Burst Mode

Gegege no Kitaro, the ancient boy spirit who labors to keep the human world free of supernatural strife, is back in this animated film for kids after a run of two live-action pictures. Kitaro answers a request for help from a female spirit, which doesn't bode well given the film's subtitle. Accompanying *Kitaro* is a short *Digimon* film with a long title in which our heroes face an evil being that sends masses of people to sleep with mysterious thorns.



Halloween II

Michael Myers is back in this Rob Zombie-directed sequel to his sociologically angled remake from a few years ago, though it is not a remake of the 1981 sequel (sorry, hospital horror fans). As subtle and as sophisticated as two kicks to the throat, escaped lunatic Michael continues his rampage in search of his sister who escaped his clutches in Part I. The violence in this one is so brutal and metronomic that it will sorely test those who think they're watching a scary movie; the dreamlike glimpses inside Michael's mind could send others into fits. There is, however, a welcome and muscular cameo by Margot Kidder.



The Admiral

The relentless hunt for European product by Taiwan's small distributors this week brings us an apparently revisionist Russian epic that turns monarchist naval commander Alexander Kolchak into a nationalist hero for 21st century viewers. The good admiral starts the film in a battle against the Germans during World War I and continues by repelling Bolshevik forces on land. Meanwhile, this heroic fellow has taken to lusting after the wife of one of his colleagues. Sounds like a real charmer. Still, if you're into period frocks and taboo romance ...



The Man Who Loves

The man here is a forlorn chap who can't seem to sustain a relationship, a problem worsened by the model love life of his gay brother. This Italian film is a sincere attempt to depict the frailties of men in relationships and offers a few name stars (Monica Bellucci, whom the hero breaks up with, is the most familiar to Taiwanese audiences), but its critical reception has been so-so. Starts tomorrow.



Fame

Another remake, this time of the iconic performance film of the early 1980s, targeting an audience that wasn't even born at the time; in Taiwan, many will never have heard of the original. A bunch of talented kids learn the ropes at the New York City High School of Performing Arts; some will make it, others won't, but it all ends in a big number that won't be selling albums or (these days) generating massive iPod downloads, despite the talent on show. Generally, this was poorly received, but it might play better for those who never saw the original and harbor fantasies of making it big in showbiz.



Sing, Salmon, Sing!

"Salmon" would appear to be the unkind nickname given to an enthusiastic but insecure Japanese schoolgirl who loves singing in her school choir. Unfortunately, she flips out when an unflattering photo of her appears in the school rag and, despondent, quits the group. Musical rehabilitation follows when she falls in with a group of "punks" who are musically inclined. This family-friendly fare comes with generous amounts of music. Remarkably, it doesn't seem to be based on a manga. Japanese title: *Utatama*.



Cross-Straits Films Exhibition

Here's another mini-festival of six Chinese films, this time at the Xinyi Vieshow in Taipei from Monday to Wednesday next week and the Vieshow Durban in Taichung from Wednesday through Friday. The titles are the disaster flick *Super Typhoon* (超強颱風), which *Variety* described as "low-rent" camp and whose hero is a mayor (sounds like a must-see); *Wild Horse From Shangri-La* (命懸800公里), *Apology* (道歉), *The Ring of Rainbow Flower* (夏天有風吹過), *Old Fish* (千鈞一髮) and *Wheat* (長平大戰之麥田). The last two open separately next week and the week after. Some of the films will introduce the director and actors after the screening.

