

The Monster Mishmash

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3-D effects are impressive, but The 'Aliens' Story Is Strictly 1-D.

The super-duper 3-D big-screen Imaxed-out extravaganza that is "Monsters vs. Aliens" has bells and whistles, whiz and bang, sound and fury. It even has Reese Witherspoon.

What it doesn't have is heart. Or soul. Or much of a story.

Witherspoon voices a character named Susan Murphy, who on her wedding day is waylaid by a meteorite and turned into a giantess, in a sequence clearly inspired by the '50s B-movie classic "Attack of the 50 Foot Woman." From her erstwhile wedding bower she's whisked to an undisclosed location that houses a double-secret team of government-created monsters, whom she teams up with to battle the alien who sent the meteorite to Earth in the first place. That squidlike villain, voiced by Rainn Wilson, has four eyes, several slurpy-sounding tentacles and a yen for a substance called Quantonium, which . . . Well, let's just say it's a substance uniquely designed to keep "Monsters vs. Aliens" plodding along, even after young viewers have lost interest in what passes for its narrative arc.

"Monsters vs. Aliens" begins with a certain amount of promise, from the space-scape of cosmic dust that looks like it's tumbling into spectators' laps to a clever bit of 3-D business featuring a paddle-ball game. (Indeed, the fun begins even before the lights go down, when little ones don their buglike oversize glasses to watch the film, making them look every bit as alien as the putative stars on screen.) But within minutes, the movie gets mired in long, talky stretches, many of them about Susan's relationship problems with her tiresome fiance Derek (Paul Rudd, utterly wasted here).

What's more, most of what passes for action takes place in a series of drab, airless bunkers and situation rooms, giving the movie a shockingly dreary and monotonous look. The most spectacular set piece of the film, a carnival of destruction set on San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, goes on way too long, with far too little payoff (although Susan's chase through the city using a pair of convertibles as roller skates is a clever touch).

Like so many vehicles that have popped out from the DreamWorks Animation snark tank, "Monsters vs. Aliens" is too clever by half. The movie, which company chief Jeffrey Katzenberg has been flogging as the flagship of his "3-D: It's the Future!" campaign, does take technology to impressive new levels. With the exception of those early gags, and one or two menacingly outstretched arms, the film uses 3-D not for stunts but to create amazing visual depth and texture. Still, does anyone younger than 18 care about the subtleties of depth of field? (For that matter, does anyone over 18 care about it?) At a recent Saturday morning screening full of youngsters and their adult charges, nary a giggle or delighted gasp could be heard, maybe because references to "Creature From the Black Lagoon," "The Fly" and "Dr. Strangelove" are lost on the SpongeBob SquarePants set.

Or perhaps it's that even little ones appreciate a good yarn. And that's precisely what's missing from "Monsters vs. Aliens," which as it goes through its formulaic motions follows a plot rather than telling a story. As per usual in a post-"Shrek" world, DreamWorks lards the proceedings with plenty of almost-naughty jokes, such as one distressing reference to "boobies" and one literally off-color line about the president (Stephen Colbert) raising the terror level to "Code Brown, because I need to check my pants."

The easily offended, then, might want to bring a hankie and smelling salts. But even viewers made of sterner stuff may find that, once "Monsters vs. Aliens" has concluded, they feel kind of empty inside. That's because, unlike the instant classics Pixar Animation Studios has become known for, "Monsters vs. Aliens" is about things, not characters. We loved "Finding Nemo" because we cared about Nemo. The genius of "WALL E" lay not in special effects, but in the little robot's searching mechanical eyes. (As Jack Black aptly noted at the Academy Awards last month, every year he makes one DreamWorks cartoon, then bets his salary on Pixar at Oscar time. Sa-nap!)

Family films offer necessary diversions for parents desperate to get their kids out of the house, it's true, but the real money lies in families buying the DVDs, video games and menageries of merchandise tie-ins. It's difficult to imagine any kid feeling like she's just gotta have a 10-inch stuffed polyester version of Dr. Cockroach (Hugh Laurie), the Missing Link (Will Arnett) or Insectosaurus (no voice needed).

One exception -- one genuine character in "Monsters vs. Aliens" -- is B.O.B., a forgetful blue gelatinous blob that not only elicits the movie's few laughs, but earns each one. B.O.B. may be a composite from other movies (his short-term amnesia harks back to Dory in "Nemo"), but as voiced by Seth Rogen, he develops his own personality and sense of humor, especially when he falls hard for a green Jell-O mold. As for the rest of "Monsters vs. Aliens," it will likely recede into your own B.O.B.-like memory bank, dissolve quickly and disappear forever.

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