



Halle Berry and Hugh Jackman in *X-Men: The Last Stand*

THE X-TERMINATORS AGAIN, WITH METAPHOR

X-Men: The Last Stand

review by George Sax

You're probably going to feel at a disadvantage if you go to see *X-Men: The Last Stand* without being familiar with the first two entries in this series. At least that was my experience. The movie takes for granted a lot of back story and there are just too many characters to keep track of. (I was a little flummoxed when, after a screening of the movie, I read a publicist's note about three new characters whom I couldn't even recall.) More than almost all the comic-based, superhero movies I've seen, *Last Stand* seems to start in the middle of an already well advanced story.

Of course, given the hundreds of millions of dollars taken in at the box office by the first two movies, there must be legions who won't be in the dark, figuratively, at this one, and a certain number of devotees of the perennial Stan Lee-Jack Kirby comic series who can play matchup and deplore the omissions and emendations that the movie exhibits.

For newcomers, getting into the spirit of things may be harder and less rewarding. In fact, I've a suspicion that even some initiates will find the proceedings flatter and less satisfying than they anticipated. *Last Stand* seems to rely on reputation-generated goodwill and its underlying conceit too much, rather than on characters, performances and wit.

The human mutants who make up the heroic X-Men—they are not just males—and their nemeses, the Brotherhood of Mutants, are allegorical standins for the outsiders victimized and persecuted throughout history's dismal march to semi-enlightenment. It's hard not to read "gay identity vs. Scientology and Christian fundamentalism's reprogramming efforts" into the movie's setup, particularly since it centers on the introduction of a new pharmaceutical cure for the mutants. This is a heavy symbolic burden for a big fantasy actioner to sustain, and *Last Stand* sometimes wobbles under the strain.

After a couple of brief opening flashback sequences—neither of which has much to do with the information gaps—the movie gives us the X-men band living in fellowship in the New York countryside at the School for the Gifted, under the guidance and leadership

of Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart). Off in Washington, the president and his cabinet, including his Secretary of Mutant Affairs, Hank McCoy, a.k.a. the Beast (Kelsey Grammer under a lot of body prosthetics and blue paint), are becoming alarmed at the belligerence of the Brotherhood, which is led by the charismatic renegade, Magneto (a somewhat damped-down Ian McKellen).

The latest prod to Magneto's will to power is the cure being offered to mutants who want to become normal. This is a guy who believes mutantcy "is the cure."

Most of the series regulars are back, notably Hugh Jackman as Wolverine (he does seem to have some flair for hokey caricature) and Halle Berry as Storm (she doesn't). You may have noticed I'm not cataloging the individual super aptitudes of the characters. You are going to have to find this stuff out on your own, like I did.

For a movie that should provide a field guide with the ticket, *Last Stand* is a busy affair, and it does seem to take itself rather seriously, by virtue of its ethical posture. (Or is it posturing?) There's too little of the pulsating kitschiness or pulpy brio that super-hero movies often used to have. There isn't a wryly drawn villain along the lines of Gene Hackman's breezily wicked Lex Luthor in the first Superman or Jack Nicholson's Joker in the first Batman ("Where does he get those toys?"). We have to make do with McKellen's rather laid-back Magneto and a couple of feeble efforts at archness.

Director Brett Ratner (*Rush Hour*) and the writers seem to have been more focused on the morality metaphor and building toward the epochal battle between the opposing mutant forces, which is a deftly, even excitingly, managed spectacle.

But the moral jolt and the poignant resonance the filmmakers want to evoke aren't really there. *X-Men: Last Stand* may serve as two-hour-plus diversion, but it's not likely to engage many people beyond that time frame.

av



Audrey Tautou and Tom Hanks in *The Da Vinci Code*

CUI BONO?

The Da Vinci Code

review by M. Faust

What, you're actually reading this? Can you possibly need yet another review of the movie that has been variously heralded from every press and pulpit as the savior of Hollywood and the scourge of Christianity? I know *The Da Vinci Code* only hit theaters less than a week ago, but haven't you had enough already?

I know I have. Because it was screened for Buffalo press too late for our deadline last week, I've had a chance to sample other reactions to Ron Howard's film of Dan Brown's megazillion copy best seller. I say "sample" in the sense that one used to "sample" cigarette smoke in a bar at two o'clock in the morning: You can try to hold your breath, but it's getting in your lungs one way or another.

And what I found was that everyone had pretty much the same reaction as me: that the movie is by any objective standard better than the book, but that it lacks the trashy qualities that were key to the book's appeal.

Ever the professionals, Howard and screenwriter Akiva Goldman, labored to make a silk purse from a sow's ear, at least in storytelling terms. From Brown's mechanical novel, they've fashioned a movie that looks and sounds and smells like a big-budget Hollywood thriller.

But they can only do so much. What fascinated readers (as best I can tell) about Brown's novel were the details it compiles about two thousand years of historically suppressed perfidy. Like Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, it crammed all the variations of a school of conspiracy

theory into one package.

Perhaps leery of being as criticized as Stone was for presenting surmise or outright fiction as accepted fact (Brown's critics in this department are loud and vociferous), scripter Goldman strips many of the details away and leaves others in a form that will be recognized only by readers of the book. In his clumsy way, Brown gives you a checklist of items for further investigation. The film, on the other hand, is highly unlikely to send viewers away questioning the premises upon which Christianity as we know it rests.

If you're into conspiracies, here's one for you to consider: Could Sony Pictures and Ron Howard have intentionally made a bland, forgettable film with the purpose of defusing the whole *Da Vinci Code* cult? As popular as the book was, the movie has already been seen by more people than will ever read it. Did Opus Dei decide that it was worth investing \$125 million in a movie for the purpose of making charges against them seem ludicrous? (The O.D. operative here, a murderous, self-flagellating albino, is as cartoonish as your average movie Nazi.) Did they hire Tom Hanks and give him the worst haircut seen on a major American movie star since Harrison Ford's "Caesar" 'do in *Presumed Innocent* as a way of both attracting and then repelling viewers?

You may discuss among yourselves. It'll be more interesting than the movie, at any rate.

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