

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Bill & Ted continue to bend time, laughs in 'Face the Music'

By T. Rob Brown

Readers, welcome to what will hopefully be a monthly tradition in movie reviews for you. What I hope to accomplish with this column is to discuss recent films and sometimes classic wonders of the silver screen.

During the temporary closures of cinemas due to the pandemic, often moviegoers may find it difficult to figure out what to watch. Sometimes, it is easy to find yourself spending more time skimming through a streaming service menu than actually watching films. If you are anything like me, you are anxious for COVID-19 to lose its hold over our social lives so we can perhaps get a taste of our old normal—which, of course, includes returning to our local Laredo cinemas.

We have wonderful offerings from all of our local cinemas. While Alamo Draft House excels in food and special parties, Regal (Hollywood) offers one of the best unlimited movie plans and Cinemark provides the most comfortable seating at its Mall Del Norte location and the cheapest cinema prices at its second location for second-run films. There's always—outside of the pandemic—a reason to choose any of them. Prior to the pandemic, I frequented them all for those reasons mentioned.

Until they can safely reopen, we must rely on a combination of our own movie collections, streaming services or new disc and/or digital purchases. Today, we will look at a few films.

So, as I began pondering what I would write about in this column, I thought back to my days as a student journalist. The first movie review I ever wrote was as the photo editor of my high school newspaper, *The Envoy*, back in Missouri. Turning the “way back machine” to February of 1989, I wrote

about an exciting new film beloved by high school and college students at the time—but often misunderstood by adults of the time—*Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989).

This is the story of two seemingly unintelligent teens, Bill S. Preston Esquire (Alex Winter) and Ted “Theodore” Logan (Keanu Reeves), who are aided by Rufus (George Carlin), a man from a future society, in order to save that future. During their adventure, they travel through time and collect famous historical figures for a mind boggling history class presentation. Without that passing grade, their rock band would be forced to break up and the future would be doomed.

The 1989 film directed by Stephen Herek received an 81% score on the Tomatometer at Rotten Tomatoes and a 75% audience score. Meanwhile, over at the International Movie Database it received a 7.0/10 rating—the highest in the series. It grossed \$40.5 million at the domestic box office, according to Box Office Mojo. It was not released internationally.

In hindsight, I remember enjoying the film but my largest complaint then was that I found the paradox complexing that something allegedly from the future had to go into the past to make itself exist—a complaint shared with many time travel films, including *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). I also recall taking some heat from my classmates for mentioning that in the original article. True, it is a comedy film and we are probably not meant to think quite so deeply about it.

Few other films can claim to blend comedy, adventure, rock music and science fiction together in such a fun way as this property does.

Coincidentally, the third and probably final installment in the Bill & Ted franchise released back in late August during the ongoing pandemic: *Bill & Ted Face the Music* (2020). While the original film focused on two high school students’ inability to grow up—or throw away their dreams of becoming legendary rock stars—the new entry in the series focuses on quite the opposite. Despite their attempts to hang onto their dreams, as adults they must—as the title implies—face the music.

The 2020 film directed by Dean Parisot is rated 6.1/10 on IMDb. Over at Rotten Tomatoes, it scored a respectable 82% (Certified Fresh) on the Tomatometer with a 70% audience score—quite comparable to the original film.

If you read any of the online movie star news about Canadian actor Reeves, you are well aware that people frequently tout him as one of the nicest guys in Hollywood. Reports go on to tell of him giving away motorcycles to filmmaking crew members and numerous other acts of kindness. It seems interesting that at age 56, the man mostly known for action films like *John Wick* (2014) and *The Matrix* (1999) would return to the big screen, and our home screens, while reprising his breakthrough role as Ted “Theodore” Logan.

Up to their usual antics, Bill and Ted find recurring and new tropes for their franchise. Rather than fighting robotic versions of themselves as they did in *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991), they find themselves in opposition to alternate timeline duplicates. This time, it’s not just their own band that must be saved for a future society—the safety of the entire cosmos is now at stake. To top it off, their marriages to the Middle Ages princesses from the original film is also on the line. It truly is time to face the music. It seems the only thing these two have going for them is the adoration of their daughters, who seem to be following quite closely in their fathers’ footsteps.

While the 1991 film directed by Peter Hewitt received a 6.3/10 on IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes did not certify it fresh—giving it a 57% on the Tomatometer and a low 56% audience score. Most critics, and myself, consider the middle film to be the weakest in the trilogy.

The newest film, released by United Artists Releasing, opened in only 1,007 cinemas—its widest release—with a \$1.12 million opening, according to Box Office Mojo. It remained in cinemas until Oct. 22. As of late January, it earned a total of \$6.27 million worldwide. It is rated PG-13 and has a running time of 1 hour and 31 minutes.

Other pandemic cinema releases and delays dominate much of the entertainment news these days. From director Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020) to director Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman 1984*, releases have met with complications and mixed reviews. Numerous titles originally slated for the silver screen were either released to streaming services and/or direct-to-disc and direct-to-digital sales.

Tenet was one of a small handful of films I was able to catch in the cinema during a brief reopening last summer. I can certainly say I'm glad I caught this one on the big screen. As per his usual, Nolan does not disappoint. For the most part, this film held the same "cool factor" that made his film *Inception* (2010) so original and interesting.

One of the things I really love about Nolan's films is that he loves to make his audience think. He wants us to contemplate what is real and what isn't, the consequences of actions, and the complications of life in general. Watching a Nolan film is not a passive act—he actively engages your mind.

For me, *Tenet*'s special effects were top-notch, the concept was brilliant and complex. While being nothing like *Inception*, it still seemed to share so much in common with it. The only weakness, when comparing the two films, is that *Tenet* lacks the emotional connections between the characters that *Inception* certainly pulls off better. In *Tenet*, several of the characters' connections are unclear and their motivations, as such, also unclear. Other than that, it's a rollercoaster ride of sci-fi excitement with an original concept.

Led by John David Washington (The Protagonist) and Robert Pattinson (Neil), these two share some great screen moments and display a great working chemistry. The antagonist Andrei Sator (Kenneth Branagh) is sadistically evil and frightening—exactly the kind of villain audiences love to hate. And if you were wondering about Sir Michael Caine, yes. As with nearly all of Nolan's films, Caine has an important but small role to play.

On Rotten Tomatoes, *Tenet* pulled in a fresh rating at 70% and a 76% audience score. Meanwhile, over at IMDb it received a 7.5/10 rating. It received an extended release, from Aug. 12 in the U.K. and Sept. 3 in the U.S. for 22 total weeks, in cinemas. It earned nearly \$58 million domestic and \$363 million worldwide, according to Box Office Mojo. It is rated PG-13 and has a runtime of 2 hours and 30 minutes.

For its release, *Wonder Woman 1984*, faced mixed reviews. Initially reviews came in favorably but around its U.S. release date at Christmas, those reviews became much more critical of Jenkins' newest entry in the franchise. It ended up with a 59% rotten rating on Rotten Tomatoes but received a 74% audience score. IMDb gave it a 5.4/10 rating.

I was able to see this film both on HBO Max and at the cinema while visiting family in Missouri over the holidays. My mom, who is a Wonder Woman fan, absolutely loved the movie. We ended up seeing it a second time on the big screen.

For me, the action sequences were great and Gal Gadot (Wonder Woman) never fails to amaze with her acting talent and grace on screen. Her interactions with Chris Pine (Capt. Steve Trevor) are humorous and add to the emotional impact of the story, despite the odd nature to which the deceased Trevor returned to the franchise.

Pedro Pascal (Maxwell Lord) plays the primary antagonist in the film. As in many of his other projects in recent years, Pascal plays a man who's trying to be a good father. Unlike his roles as the surrogate father *Mandalorian* (Disney+ (2019-)) or the superhero dad Marcus Moreno (Robert Rodriguez's *We Can Be Heroes* (2020)), this time Pascal isn't the best father in the world. His character seems to be a Trickster and Shapeshifter archetype.

Kristen Wiig (Barbara Minerva/Cheetah) also fulfills the role of a Shapeshifter archetype as she moves from being an ally of Wonder Woman into the secondary antagonist of the film. Personally, I wish she had a lot more screen time as Cheetah. I believe they underused this classic Wonder Woman villain.

The film was simultaneously released in cinemas and on HBO Max. Despite its six-week cinema run, it only earned \$39.2 million domestic and \$152.2 million worldwide, according to Box Office Mojo. It is rated PG-13 and has a runtime of 2 hours and 35 minutes.

Until it's safe to return to our local cinemas, we'll continue to bask in the electronic glow of films like these. As they say both on the stage and in Hollywood, "The show must go on."