

They're Back

In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Arnold Schwarzenegger delivered three words that became his signature: "I'll be back." Uttered tonelessly by The Arnold, the line was wholly ambiguous. While it served notice that the Terminator would return to complete his mission no matter what obstacles stood in his mechanically plodding way, it was not at all clear whether this was a promise or a threat. And there was another question: Was The Arnold talking in his character's voice or in his own? Rarely has there been so little difference between a performer and his screen persona. Both are relentless, although, as the driven determinator of his own success, The Arnold has a clear edge on his character.

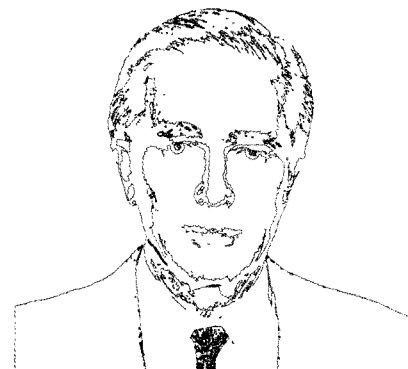
Relentlessness is an attribute that Arnold shares with summer blockbusters. They, too, are extravagantly unstoppable. No matter how much film critics fume, no matter how much parents groan, the blockbusters continue shamelessly to target our young ones. Why? To paraphrase Willie Sutton on banks, that's where the money is. By the dog days of August, not many parents have resisted their youngsters' demands to see the latest in blow-'em-up-big cinema.

This summer's offerings are no different. In some cases, they are warmed-over versions of their predecessors. *The Matrix Reloaded*, discussed in my August column, is a stale dish drearily concocted from the once-fresh ingredients of *The Matrix*. *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* does not even pretend to be new. It simply repeats its past incarnations. The eponymous hero of *The Hulk* may seem fresh in his green skin, but anyone who has seen *King Kong* or *Mighty Joe Young* will know better. The monster tamed by the love of a good woman has a long, long pedigree. The one summer film that boasts a bit of originality does so by working in that rarest of genres, the screen adaptation of a theme-park ride. The Disney people have boldly brought us *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. Presumably, they are catering to that underprivileged portion of American youth who have failed to blackmail their parents into making the pilgrimage to Disney World or Land.

Of course, in the blockbuster field, no one can compare to The Arnold. In *Terminator 3*, he once again shows up clothesless in Los Angeles in search of a young man. Now, don't get the wrong idea; Arnold's not that way. In fact, he has no interest in fleshly attractions of any kind. Under those walloping muscles, he is a steel-cold robot. As everyone knows, Arnold plays an obsolete Terminator model, the T-800, once programmed to kill humans but now committed to saving them. He has come from the future to protect John Connor, the tyro slated to lead humans in their rebellion against a machine-dominated civilization. To do so, he must confront a new generation Terminator, the T-X, who also time-travels in the buff, but to spectacularly better effect. This machine looks remarkably like high-fashion model Kristanna Loken. Like so many other young ladies arriving in Los Angeles, she finds herself with nothing to wear. Naturally, she stops by Rodeo Drive to cover her charms in high couture. Donning a leather suit and slicking back her blond hair, she looks and moves exactly like a model should, swiveling her head and hips atop her long, striding legs and casting an imperious gaze on everyone she meets. Only her right hand gives her away. It morphs on digital command into a supergrade Swiss Army knife, assuming an endless line of weaponry and home-repair tools—a machine gun, flamethrower, and buzz saw, for starters.

T3 is not without charm, especially when it revels in its own silliness. It is punctuated with jokey references to its predecessors. "I'll be back" becomes "She'll be back," in deference to feminists whose determination is no less steely than Arnold's. This time, the Terminator yanks his *de rigueur* motorcycle jacket off a male stripper rather than off a true biker, so the sunglasses in the zippered pocket disconcertingly resemble Elton John's starburst frames.

While such humor is welcome, director Jonathan Mostow has not had the nerve or, more probably, the liberty to go all the way and make his film a true send-up of the earlier models. The production has been variously reported to have cost



Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines

Produced and distributed by
Warner Brothers

Directed by Jonathan Mostow

Screenplay by John Brancato,
Michael Ferris, and Tedi Sarafian

The Hulk

Produced and distributed
by Universal Pictures

Directed by Ang Lee

Screenplay by John Turman,
Michael France, and James Schamus

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl

Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer Films
and Walt Disney Pictures

Directed by Gore Verbinski

Screenplay by Ted Elliott
and Terry Rossio

Distributed by The Walt
Disney Company

150, 170, or 175 million bucks. (Frankly, I didn't see anything that looked a dime over \$100 million.) When it comes to risking their money, investors are notoriously humorless. At the same time, by introducing the comedic touches he does, Mostow has undercut his ability to create any genuine suspense.

In the absence of any dramatic verve, there is little to do but marvel at Arnold himself. At 55, he's pumped his body up to the absurd proportions he sported 20 years ago, and the film seems to pay tribute to this as a demonstration of relentless ambition. He is the 21st century's Gatsby, a man ready to reinvent himself in the service of his gaudy, meretricious dreams. His approach to show business

resembles Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy. Arnold has never stopped coming at us. Like his Terminator character, he cannot be deterred. Can't act? No problem. I'll play a robot. Can't lose my Austrian accent. So what? I'll assimilate by marrying a Kennedy. Nothing stops Arnold. He has applied his bodybuilding ethos to his career. To get results, he performs more repetitions.

Bodybuilding is considerably easier in Ang Lee's adaptation of *The Hulk*. Bruce Banner merely has to get angry to become ten times the muscle man Schwarzenegger ever was. In fact, the madder he gets, the bigger he grows, rising from 9 to 15 feet depending upon the severity of the provocation. In keeping with this "more is more" premise, Lee has given us two films for the price of one. Unfortunately, they add up to barely half an entertainment. While each half is quite good, they never come together dramatically.

The first half concerns two young people who would be falling deliriously into each other's arms but for their paternal problems. Betty Ross (played by the evermore-beautiful Jennifer Connelly) finds Bruce Banner (Australian actor Eric Bana) as irresistible as he is unapproachable. Her longing, she explains, is "just a by-product of my inexplicable obsession with emotionally distant men." When we meet her father, General Ross (Sam Elliott), however, her obsession becomes all too explicable. The old man has never respected her or her career in scientific research.

Bruce Banner also has father problems. When he was still an infant, his old man tried to bioengineer his cells so that they would be endlessly regenerative, but something went seriously wrong. As a result, Bruce becomes an emotional cripple with severe identity problems. Drawn to bioengineering himself, Bruce sticks to responsible experimentation, until he accidentally exposes himself to a fatal dose of gamma rays. The gammas don't kill him, however. Instead, they unleash his inner Hulk. This is where the second film begins. When Banner's body swells into the Hulk, Lee surrenders to the boys supplying the computer-generated imagery. Lee collaborated with them closely, even wearing wired overalls so that he could enact the Hulk's rages himself and have them directly transcribed into the graphics program used to generate the monster. Nevertheless, the computer whizzes have let him down badly. The Hulk looks and often moves like a car-

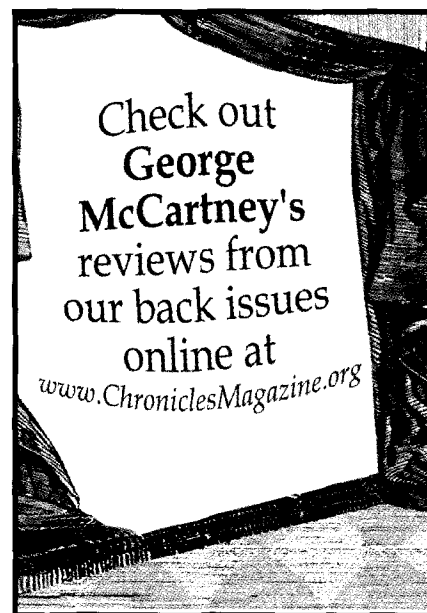
toon. Given Lee's rather solemn conception of the story line, this does not jibe. We must be made to feel that the Hulk is Banner's repressed rage, but we never are. After one transformation, Banner makes a confession to Betty: "When it comes over me, when I totally lose control, I like it." We don't believe him, however. How could we? When the Hulk shows up, he runs about the New Mexico desert tossing tanks over his head and plucking helicopter gunships out of the air. These sequences are fun, but they have nothing to do with the believable characters the actors have been instructed to play. This disconnect is even more apparent when the Hulk begins springing over hills and buttes hundreds of feet high. His lightness simply does not comport with the film's gravity.

Lee has taken the comic-book plot and tried to invest it with the sophistication of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. He wants to explore the inevitable tension between the civil and savage selves harbored within us all. To make this work dramatically, however, he must convince us that the two arise from the same personality. He might have done so had he arranged for Bana to play both Banner and the Hulk. A judicious application of special effects could have made this quite fascinating. After all, Spencer Tracy played Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in 1941, brilliantly dramatizing the difference between the two with nothing more than some judiciously applied make-up and his formidable acting skills.

Of all this summer's films, none is weirder than Walt Disney Pictures' *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which plays like the theme-park ride on which it is based. These rides usually take their passengers through three circuits of their "events." Here, too, after the first 40 minutes, you begin to feel that you are seeing the same episodes again and again with only the slightest variations. *Pirates* led by Geoffrey Rush turn up in Port Royal in search of a cursed gold medallion. They abduct the governor's daughter (Keira Knightley), who has hidden the medallion in her bodice knowing full well this is the last place pirates would look. She is saved by a young blacksmith, who secretly loves her, and is captured again, this time with the smitten blacksmith in tow. She is rescued once more, but not entirely. And so it goes, with visits to a haunted cave filled with pirate booty. There are plots within plots punctuated with sword

fight, sea chases, exiles on desert isles, and many a threat of being sent to Davy Jones' locker.

Then there is Johnny Depp's portrayal of Capt. Jack Sparrow. Depp seems to have wandered on the set from another film altogether. Much has been made of his mascara-assisted performance. Critics have suggested he's playing his character as a homosexual buccaneer. I think Depp had something else in mind. He plays Sparrow as though he were a rum-soaked Wallace Beery channeling Long John Silver through Mary Martin's Peter Pan. There has never been a film pirate like him. With a whispery growl and elfin physique, he weaves woozily through the movie, lifting its comic spirits. Lacking size and strength, Sparrow is a scalawag who relies on his wit and luck to overcome his many foes. Watching him make one mistake after another, one enemy keeps saying, "That's the worst pirate I've ever seen," until he ruefully notices that Sparrow never fails to land on his feet. Like Peter Pan, he may not have grown up, but neither has he been brought low by the straitened predictability of age. In keeping with the spontaneity of his character, Depp makes everything he does seem an inspired improvisation. If anyone has any doubts about this young man's abilities, this film will put them to rest, especially in the scenes he performs with the mercurial Geoffrey Rush. The actors thrive on each other's energy, Depp playing a sly, dissolute Pan to Rush's blithering Captain Hook. Together, they lift the curse of the film's unwarranted two-hour-and-23-minute running time.



Homecoming

I'd worked in the oil patch for several weeks already when I bought a T-shirt at the J.C. Penney Mother Store in Kemmerer. The shirt was fire-engine red with black lettering across the chest. The letters said, "IF YOU HAVE ONLY SIX MONTHS TO LIVE MOVE TO KEMMERER WYOMING. IT'LL SEEM LIKE A LIFETIME." Since then, 24 years have come and gone without my having ever really left the place, though I haven't lived there since 1997. I wasn't reared there, but it's where I grew up. Maureen sat forward on the bench seat and craned her neck for a first look as the pickup rounded the curve in the banked highway on the south edge of town.

"It's *pretty*!" she exclaimed, in a pleased voice. "I was afraid I wasn't going to like it. I didn't care for the country we came through around Rock Springs and Green River, at all."

I felt slightly shocked, though, of course, I agreed with her. After nearly a quarter of a century, it wasn't the reaction I was used to hearing. The last Easterner I could recall whose response to the locale had been appreciative was the late Francis Russell, the historian from Massachusetts, and that was two decades ago. Ordinarily, my response to the philistine's inability to recognize the ethereal when it slaps him in the face is relief (he won't be moving here with his family anytime soon); this, however, was my wife speaking. Two years after the occasion of my godmother's funeral Mass at St. Patrick Church, the town (three towns, actually: Diamondville, Kemmerer, and Frontier, totaling some 3,500 residents) looked as I always remember it: a spill of frame houses at the bottom of a steep valley and climbing the rounding hills to the west, the tin roofs glinting among black fir spires touched by the evening light, under the whale-backed bulk of Oyster Ridge and nearly in the blue shadow of Sheep Mountain rising sheerly to the north.

"I'm glad you think it's pretty," I told Maureen.

"I do! *Much* prettier than Laramie."

"You know, if it weren't for those lunches at Billy Budd's twenty-seven years ago, I'd never believe you were really a New Yorker."

I drove on past the Energy Inn in Diamondville where we had a room reserved for the night, not bothering to drop off the trailer with the mare in it, and on to the Triangle downtown, where the original Penney's store faces off against what in golden days was the Star Bar—formerly renowned in disreputable taverns as far away as Salt Lake City—where Jack Mootz used to pick up a replacement hand on the way out to the drill rig when one of the crew failed to report for Morning Tour. I showed Maureen the Stock Exchange (an alternate drinking hole, which she, being an Easterner, found oddly named) and the Liquor Locker around the corner (shockingly closed since my last visit), the house at 1025 Beech Street on the courthouse square, Lincoln Heights overlooking the splendid landforms around, and St. Patrick, where, 11 years before, I was baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church by the late Fr. William Espen-shade. "This town has charm," Maureen decided.

"You amaze me—as usual. Do you want to stop and look in on the old place?"

"No," she said decidedly. "It's the past, and the past is . . . the past."

"You're right," I agreed. "Let's get our room at the motel, and the horse a drink. A couple for us, too."

The motel manager said she and her husband didn't know anyone in town: They'd lived here only four years, she explained. We carried the luggage in, and I watered the horse. When I returned to the room, Maureen had our supper laid out and two bottles of wine, one red and one white, ready to be poured.

"If it weren't for Kemmerer, we might have been married 27 years ago," I said. "Only I wouldn't have been any use to you then. When I moved out here from the East in '79, I'd never fired a gun in my life, or killed a deer. I didn't know how to get on with anyone but a college graduate or the upper crust. I did understand something about horses, though. To understand what happened after that, you need to read *Roughnecking It*. It's not really a girl's book, of course. Friends who bought copies to give as Christmas presents ended up returning them to the



publisher or donating them to Goodwill. Even people who'd been in the Army couldn't take the language. Which is funny, since so many of those oil patch guys had served in the Army. Anyway, they were drafted into it."

"We each had things we were meant to do first, you and I."

"I know it," I agreed. "In my case, it was Kemmerer. Anyway—a toast to the old dump! God, it's good to be home."

When the truck wouldn't fire right away in the morning, I took it in to the Wagner brothers' service station, with the horse and trailer still attached. Mark determined the trouble was the starter and sent me up Pine Street to Eric's shop to replace it. Maureen and I went for breakfast at the Busy Bee café, where Brad Willford stopped in when we were halfway through the meal. The four-year drought had strapped the ranchers financially, while he himself was working 72 hours a day to keep his company's creditors in business. Afterward, I took Maureen into Sawaya's clothing store next door to the Bee, where we found Mary Sawaya on the floor. She and John had opened a second store in Evanston and appeared to be prospering in business. Mary invited us to Sunday dinner when we returned from the mountains, and I'd have encouraged Maureen to buy a little something from the store if it weren't a break in discipline. Buying supplies at the Safeway (whiskey, beer, ice, a little fresh fruit), I was kept busy introducing my bride to friends from church, all of whom had news of our marriage through the diocesan grapevine.

Late spring rains that could not relieve the drought still had greened Pomeroy Basin north of town and the Fontenelle country above it. Fat antelope grazed the drainage, belly-high in waving grass under a white-hot sun, beside the heavy