

'Legend' long on beauty, short on content

Ridley Scott is one of the few directors alive who can create a new universe through attention to visual detail alone. His movies boast a technical sophistication and unique style light years beyond most Hollywood efforts. Production design has never been used to as good an effect as in depicting the otherworldly hell of "Alien" or the futuristic Los Angeles of "Blade Runner."

Unfortunately Scott's movies aren't known for their narrative depth. In "Alien" his style managed to mask what was essentially a fairly routine sci-fi/horror plot, while "Blade Runner" was a terrific vision of the future if not a terrific story.

Given the title and the extremely conventional plot, perhaps Scott intended it to be a generic fantasy but if so, why?

Why tell a story that nobody finds interesting?

"Legend" takes place in an Edenic realm where the forces of Darkness are in constant conflict with the forces of Light. The realm is populated by a pair of innocent young lovers, Jack (Tom Cruise) and Lili (Mia Sara), who, like Adam and Eve, have no knowledge of evil.

Their innocence proves disastrous when Lili breaks one of the realm's unspoken rules: she touches a unicorn, the legendary keeper of Light. This act leaves the unicorn defenseless, allowing the minions of Darkness to steal its horn and plunge the world into a state of perpetual winter.

This opening sequence has an aura of magic and wonder that draws the viewer in and promises to keep him there. But then the movie turns

into just another predictable "quest," with Jack and his elf friends journeying to Darkness's castle to retrieve the horn and rescue Lili, who has been captured and seduced by the evil lord's charms. It's the kind of thing we've seen a thousand times before, and Scott simply refuses to add any new wrinkles to it.

He almost doesn't need to. The dazzling artistry of the sets, costumes, makeup effects and camera techniques takes the place of storyline in this movie. It's an incredibly beautiful vision, one of the most technically perfect ever filmed. Some scenes, such as the one in which Jack comes upon the fallen unicorn in the forest, are genuinely moving.

Like Lili, you almost want to give in to the movie's charms. But after it's all over,

you're left wishing for something more.

The performances are as good as can be expected, given the one-dimensionality of the script. Tim Curry plays the villain to the hilt, even if he does look like a cross between Beelzebub and Bevo. Mia Sara also excels, bringing to her role a freshness that may herald the coming of a new star.

Poor Tom Cruise, however, simply can't do a thing with the role of Jack. His is the typical fantasy hero, pared down to the bare essentials. Not even Cruise, fine actor that he is, can play a character when there's no character to play.

In the end, "Legend" can do no more than dazzle the viewer with its visual artistry. Whatever promise it showed at the beginning fades long before the credits roll. It is a wonderful movie to look at, but not so much fun to watch.

'Hitcher' shows your mother was right

"The Hitcher" is one of those "either-or" movies. Depending on your point of view, you'll find it either incredibly fascinating or fantastically repulsive.

One thing that can't be denied is the film's intensity level. There hasn't been a more suspenseful, relentless or gut-wrenching movie since "Jaws." Most of us were brought up knowing the credo, "Never pick up a hitchhiker," and after seeing the movie, no matter how innocent one might look (and they seldom look innocent), I never will.

Jim Halsey (C. Thomas Howell) never learned his lesson well enough. While driving through Texas en route to California, Jim picks up a mysterious hitchhiker (Rutger Hauer) to keep himself from falling asleep at the wheel. "My mother told me never to do this," Jim tells the hitcher

cheerfully. Well, Jim, your mother was right.

Before long the hitcher calmly informs Jim that he disremembered the last guy who picked him up. Terrified, Jim asks, "What do you want from me?" The reply: "I want you to stop me."

Jim eventually escapes from the hitcher but the fiend soon pops up again. And again. And again.

As more people pick up the hitcher, more bodies litter the highway, and the hitcher sets Jim up so he looks like the murderer. Then the state police are after Jim with the hitcher not far behind.

What the movie amounts to is 95 minutes of psychological torture. The hitcher refuses to leave Jim alone but also refuses to kill him. He simply kills other people instead, usually in nasty ways and usually forcing Jim to watch. And because the film is

and promises to keep him there. But then the movie turns into just another predictable "quest," with Jack and his elf friends journeying to Darkness's castle to retrieve the horn and rescue Lili, who has been captured and seduced by the evil lord's charms. It's the kind of thing we've seen a thousand times before, and Scott simply refuses to add any new wrinkles to it.

He almost doesn't need to. The dazzling artistry of the sets, costumes, makeup effects and camera techniques takes the place of storyline in this movie. It's an incredibly beautiful vision, one of the most technically perfect ever filmed. Some scenes, such as the one in which Jack comes upon the fallen unicorn in the forest, are genuinely moving.

Like Lili, you almost want to give in to the movie's charms. But after it's all over,

you're left wishing for something more.

The performances are as good as can be expected, given the one-dimensionality of the script. Tim Curry plays the villain to the hilt, even if he does look like a cross between Beelzebub and Bevo. Mia Sara also excels, bringing to her role a freshness that may herald the coming of a new star.

Poor Tom Cruise, however, simply can't do a thing with the role of Jack. His is the typical fantasy hero, pared down to the bare essentials. Not even Cruise, fine actor that he is, can play a character when there's no character to play.

In the end, "Legend" can do no more than dazzle the viewer with its visual artistry. Whatever promise it showed at the beginning fades long before the credits roll. It is a wonderful movie to look at, but not so much fun to watch.

by Matt Diedrich
 movie reviewer