

REEL CRITIQUE

FEEL THE BEAT

"The Last Samurai" Warner Brothers Starring Tom Cruise

"The Last Samurai" is highly entertaining, and features excellent action scenes and likeable characters. However, "The Last Samurai" is far from a perfect film. Clichéd plot points and many horribly mediocre bouts of dialogue work to prevent "The Last Samurai" from reaching a true level of greatness.

Director Edward Zwick depicts Tom Cruise as a Civil War veteran on a downward spiral in life. When Capt. Woodrow Algren (Cruise) is sent to Japan to train the Emperor's troops in modern war tactics, he soon finds himself captured by the rebellious samurai he was sent to kill. Upon his capture, Algren is taken to the samurai's village, where he finds himself enchanted by the way of the samurai and in admiration of the rebellion's leader, Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe).

This plot works to create plenty of drama and character interaction, that is, if you ignore the startling similarity to the period epic, "Dances with Wolves," amongst other movies. This film often seems cobbled together from the more memorable aspects present in other highly successful films. Failing to present anything original, "The Last Samurai" frequently comes off as a stylized version of a story told many times before.

The film opens on a high note, featuring a collection of visually stunning shots of the Japanese islands. More beautiful location footage is present throughout the rest of the movie that will be a treat for the eyes. Cinematographer John Toll does an admirable job of capturing the majestic mountains and peaceful fields. The battle scenes scattered throughout the movie are more testaments to Toll's fine work. Without having to rely on the use of heavy jump cut editing, Zwick uses Toll's skill wonderfully to capture the epic conflicts.

Cruise does a nice job portraying the disgraced captain who works to find his inner honor with the help of the samurai. In fact, with the exception of two highly distracting set extras that portrayed Englishmen in the streets of Tokyo, the entire cast is wonderful. Timothy Spall was especially enjoyable to watch as Simon Graham, an Englishman who was working on a book about the samurai.

With an exceptional cast, beautiful cinematography and a competent director, most of the movie's fault falls on the shoulders of the screenwriters. Besides being a medley of borrowed plot points from various movies, the script contains some of the most passé dialogue found in any movie this year. If audience members have seen even a handful of similar movies, they will find themselves guessing the actor's lines before they are spoken. The presence of such hackneyed lines mere minutes after pleasantly poetic lines are spoken is especially troubling. It is almost as if somebody was brought into the screenwriting process to Hollywood-ize the movie to make it more appealing to a mass audience, and, in the process, losing most of what would have made this movie a sure-fire contender for a best picture Oscar.

The movie is entertaining, full of moments of awesome action containing everything from epic battles to crazy ninja fight scenes, but unfortunately "The Last Samurai," besides being presumptuously named, fails to reach the level of excellence it had the potential for. Weighed down with an unoriginal story and bad dialogue, the film is still a great holiday film that will please most audiences. Just don't go into the film expecting a smart romp in the realm of greatness.



-- Robert Saucedo

"In The Zone" Britney Spears Jive Records

If a discography reflects an artist's growth over the years, then Britney Spears' rite of passage into adulthood is sealed with "In The Zone." The star has matured, and the sickeningly sweet bubblegum of "...Baby One More Time" (1998) has been replaced by cigarettes, alcohol and a Wonderbra. This isn't a CD you can take home to mom, but it is a sophisticated comeback that will ensure Spears more fame and fortune.

Skeptics who point to Spears' first three albums and attribute her success to dream management and aerobic workouts will find more difficulty defending their opinion with this new release. Venturing into a world of trance and hip-hop while never straying from her usual sound, Spears collaborates with artists such as Madonna, R. Kelly and Moby to bring tons of energy and edge to an album that leaves little to be desired.

Speaking of desire, there is a topic not taboo on "In The Zone": Sex. "I don't really wanna be a tease/Could you undo my zipper, please?" Spears says in one song. "Don't stop 'cause I'm halfway there," she moans in the following.

The sexy lyrics will raise more than just a few eyebrows. Examples are the mantra of her outrageous qualities whispered in "Outrageous" (her body, her sexy jeans, her sex drive, to name a few) and the racy track "Touch of My Hand," which describes the singer "closing the blinds" and admitting, "I'm into myself in the most precious way ... Another day without a lover/The more I come to understand the touch of my hand."

But innuendo isn't the only reason this album will sell - it's full of single-worthy songs. "Toxic," an energetic hip-hop dance number with an infectious hook and passionate, techno-flavored "Breathe on Me" are star tracks. The relaxed, catchy vibe "Early Mornin'" is about a late night out, and the song "Touch of My Hand" features a captivating string arrangement that paints it with an Oriental brush.

Comparing ballads, if Spears' insecurity of being "not a girl, not yet a woman" was hard to believe, "Everytime" will leave listeners pleasantly surprised. The emotional song pairs true vocal talent with beautiful piano accompaniment to present a serious, sincere Spears.

Pop icon Madonna's presence is eerily sensed in more than just her vocals on current chart-topper, "Me Against the Music," most of this album is reminiscent of the Material Girl's sound. From the lusty moans and heavy breathing throughout Spears' album to the electronic dance track "Brave New Girl" (which suspiciously resembles Madonna's latest dance hits), it seems Britney is mimicking a career pattern that obviously works. Spears refreshingly abandons her saccharine-laden, teeny-bopper tunes, causing fans to scream "variety," but the album remains steadfast in the pop school. Spears co-wrote most of "In The Zone," making this album her most original, but it is mainly distinguished from past works by a trance sound and necktie-loosening lyrics.

For listeners anxious for profundity or political messages, look elsewhere than this artist's red, glossy lips this time around. But for those looking for entertainment - what Spears does best - "In The Zone" delivers.



-- Julia Bone

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PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Marilyn Monroe's 'Seven Year Itch' outfit sells for \$58,750

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. (AP) — A sequined, strapless pant-outfit and shawl worn by Marilyn Monroe in "The Seven Year Itch" sold for \$58,750 at a charity auction of Hollywood costumes.

Actress Debbie Reynolds auctioned off nearly 400 movie costumes and props to raise money for a permanent museum for the rest of her Hollywood collection. Saturday's auction was conducted at Le Meridien Hotel in Beverly Hills, with bids also taken online at eBay and by phone.

Monroe's outfit and its accompanying pink satin shawl were worn briefly in the 1955 film. The event raised more than \$500,000 for the planned Hollywood Motion Picture Museum, according to Darren Julien of Julien Entertainment.

A dinner with Reynolds sold for \$5,875. Another costume worn by Monroe, a late 1800s-styled jacket and dress from her 1950 film "A Ticket To Tomahawk," sold for \$41,125.

Other items included an original 1939 poster for "Gone With The Wind," which sold at \$11,750; and, \$5,875 for the white denim uniform worn by Sigourney Weaver in the 1979 sci-fi horror film "Alien."

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