



V for Vendetta

Running time: 132 minutes
MPAA rating: R

It is the year 2020. America is in the grip of civil war, plague and chaos. In England, people are under the thumb of a totalitarian despot named Sutler (William Hurt). Britons are constantly under surveillance; on the TV a religious-right demagogue rails against well, everything; food is rationed and curfews imposed.

This is the dystopian near-future presented in "V for Vendetta," director James McTeigue's adaptation of Alan Moore's graphic 1980s novel. The problem with this adaptation is that Moore's book was a leftist reactionary screed against the far-right policies of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, while McTeigue's (and producers Larry and Andy Wachowski's) vision is a muddled mélange of allusions to current events, with hefty dollops of political bumper-sticker slogans that don't quite add up to a manifesto. If you were looking for an Idea Movie, this one isn't it.

Still, there's lots of stuff that gets "blowed-up real good" and some pretty nifty fight scenes to keep you awake between Hugo Weaving's (V) droning monologues, alliterative lita-

nies and asexual seduction of Natalie Portman's character.

Portman gives a great emotional performance as Evey, the protégé of the terrorist/freedom fighter V. Her only problem is nailing down that English accent. Sometimes it's there, sometimes it's ... over there behind the couch. Go Natty! Fetch the accent! Gooood girl.

As the first of the big, dumb blockbusters to numb us this year, "V for Vendetta" will certainly please 14-year-old boys and stoner college freshmen who've just discovered that the dude on their T-shirt was some guy name Che and he, like, rocked and stuff.

For anyone else, it's just another noisy movie pretending to be relevant.
GRADE: C+

Inside Man

Running time: 128 minutes
MPAA rating: R

"Inside Man" is one of the better Spike Lee films I've seen in some time. On the surface, the film looks like the standard potboiler heist movie. But what makes this film enjoyable is the tight scripting and first-rate performances by the stellar cast: Denzel Washington, Clive Owen, Jodie Foster, Christopher Plummer and Willem Dafoe. I mean, come on, how could this NOT be a good picture?

Owen stars as Dalton Russell, a smooth-as-silk bank robber who may turn out to be as smart as he thinks he is. Russell and his crew invade a bank, take hostages and proceed to get down to business. However, the business at

hand isn't your run-of-the-mill heist.

Russell dresses up all the hostages in the bank robbers' outfits and releases them — along with the rest of his accomplices. Detective Keith Frazier (Washington) and Capt. Darius (Dafoe) are stuck with the problem of trying to figure out who are the true hostages and robbers, and — here's the cool part — why no money was stolen from the bank. All that was disturbed was a single safe-deposit box belonging to the bank's founder and president (Plummer).

When Detective Frazier starts asking questions about why Plummer's box was the only thing ransacked during the heist, Plummer calls in a "fixer" (Foster) to thwart the detective's prying into Mr. Case's past.

"Inside Man" is definitely one of the better films I've seen this year, which surprised me because I never expected a director like Lee to make a film like this. The performances are solid, and there's never a moment when the tension breaks or you feel like checking your watch. This is definitely worth checking out.

GRADE: A-

Ice Age: The Meltdown

Running time: 93 minutes
MPAA rating: PG

It's safe to say that no one is going to see "Ice Age: The Meltdown" because they're looking forward to an electrifying performance by Ray Romano. No, the reason why anyone over the age of say, fetus, is heading to the theater is to get another healthy

dose of Scrat the Sabertoothed Squirrel.

Thankfully, the filmmakers know their audience, and I'm happy to say that there are a LOT more scenes of Scrat's futile (and painful) attempts to capture the Last Acorn on Earth.

Of course, the film isn't totally about Scrat. The plot revolves around a bunch of animals who have three days to escape their valley home before an ice dam breaks and floods them into extinction. Helping the animals are the heroes from the first film: Manny the Mammoth (voiced by Ray Romano), Diego the Sabertooth Tiger (Denis Leary) and Sid the Sloth (John Leguizamo).

There's also a boring and unconvincing subplot involving Manny's fretting about being the last of his kind, until he meets Ellie (Queen Latifah), a female mammoth who thinks she's a possum.

The main plot is pretty pedestrian. We all know that everything's gonna turn out fine; everyone will live happily ever after; and anyone whose character at the beginning of the film has some personal demon to conquer will, by Act Three, have a Personal Growth Moment.

Which is all fine and good for a children's movie. What's Old Hat to us grown-ups is fresh and new to the younguns, and goodness knows kids need some lessons in commitment, friendship and family.

But for the rest of us, it's all about Scrat.

GRADE: A-

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