

breakers

'Transformers' Sequel Is Organized Mayhem

By BILL GEIGER

As we zoom toward midsummer, the Hollywood movie machine keeps punching them out. Besides our requisite big-bang-boom film, "Transformers," which everyone worth his or her Hasbro stocks is hoping scores big, we have two softer films to discuss this week. They're both of the humorous persuasion; one hits the target and the other almost misses completely.

Let's get to the big one first, the much-anticipated sequel to "Transformers," **"Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen."** With a built-in audience and legions of kids who used to — or still do — play with the toys (a marketing bonanza, to be sure), this one can't miss. You can practically hear the cash registers ringing. Too bad all these folks are watching a bad film.

Horribly long, and very boring in the middle part, this film proves that no matter how bad a story is, get Michael Bay to direct it and throw in enough explosions and huge robots battling each other to deaden three of the viewer's five senses, and the film will make money. It won't be on any "best of" lists, but by golly it'll be an economic success. It will appeal to teenage boys and to older viewers who like reality TV shows such as "Biggest Loser" and whatever "Survivor" incarnation they're regurgitating now, viewers with very little critical discrimination and those who put very little thought into watching a film.

The story behind this is told by a robot our heroes resurrect from the Smithsonian Institution, the second time the venerable Washington, D.C., museum is used in a film this summer. Do I hear mini-renaissance? Anyway, this robot, with an Australian accent (but needs one more shrimp on the barbie!), is an old codger, even walks with some kind of robotic cane, and sheds light on who the "Fallen" are supposed to be.

Turns out there were several "primes," of which our Optimus (Peter Cullen's voice) is the last one. They were hounded into a desert stronghold by the bad guys, the Decepticons, led by Megatron (voiced by Hugo Weaving) and some other robot-dude Megatron answers to, with Darth Vader's voice. The Autobots, the good guys, are led by Optimus Prime and various others who, in many ways, have a happy-go-lucky mentality.

In the film's prologue, we learn that the robots have been on Earth many times and have helped the primitive humans evolve (sounds like "2001: A Space Odyssey"). It must have been hard for them since they didn't have anything primitive to transform into, until humans produced technology. Oh well, I guess they chose the wrong planet. But they did help build the pyramids and had a hand in developing several other civilizations. Too bad they didn't pay more attention to developing human filmmaking technology and the critical appreciation thereof.

Speaking of humans, Sam Witwicky (Shia LaBeouf) is back, and so is his main squeeze, Mikaela (Megan Fox). Sam is off to college on the East Coast (it looks suspiciously like the University of Pennsylvania campus) and he's beset by transformer problems. First a piece of the spark(!!) from the first film falls from an old backpack and winds up burning Sam's hand and going through two floors of the house before it fires up all the appliances in Sam's house to go after him and destroy things. Thank goodness that Bumblebee, Sam's transformer car, storms in to the rescue.

Then when Sam tries to spend some time getting to know his campus and roommates, the Decepticons are on his tail, sending a beautiful coed robot to entice Sam to some kind of mind meld. It appears that Sam is the key to the Decepticons ruling the universe since his mind contains a map to the legendary matrix. Luckily, Mikaela is on the case, having come east to help Sam. Sam's roommate, Leo Spitz (Ramon Rodriguez), gets dragged along for the ride, and he lends the film some

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funny moments.

Sam's parents once again provide the comic relief, but they get more involved here than in the first "Transformers." Bummer for them! Mom Judy Witwicky (Julie White) is still the funnier of the two. Dad Ron (Kevin Dunn) is the solid base of the family until he and Judy are kidnapped by the Decepticons.

Loud explosions and deafening transformer battles ensue. But my problem with films like this involves consequence. I'd like to know how a film can purport to espouse realism, yet never show any consequences of these explosions. The film begins in Shanghai, where residents are told to evacuate due to a toxic gas leak. In reality, the Autobots were heading there to ferret out some Decepticons. It was a military action, with a good deal of the city being destroyed, yet no one has caught on. And the climactic battle in the desert destroys pyramids and ancient sites, yet you never hear of any consequences.

Furthermore, if a Decepticon can transform itself into a pretty coed, why don't the bad guys use a human disguise more frequently? It would seem to give them the edge in blending into many situations when they're on Earth. In truth, as I said earlier, I was yawning throughout the mid-part of the film, and "Transformers" only came to life after John Turturro, as agent Simmons from the first film, came on board. But his entrance could not lift the film out of the silliness it had descended into.

That silliness was exacerbated by the appearance of Rainn Wilson as an astronomy professor, embodying all the clichés that Hollywood sees in higher education. In one three-minute sequence on the first day in class, Wilson's Professor Colon, dressed in sport coat, open shirt and a scarf thrown rakishly about his neck, speaks pedantically while eating an apple and propositions the pretty coeds in his class. Yes, that's what college astronomy classes are like.

In the end, after roughly two and a half hours of mayhem, including the destruction of whole aircraft carrier groups and many cultural icons, "Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen" mercifully ends. My same criticism from the first one still applies here: When the transformers fight, I can't tell which are Autobots and which are the Decepticons. So, when the film climaxed, it was like watching a football game where everyone wears the same uniform and looks exactly alike. Organized mayhem. Come to think of it, that's a good description of the overall quality of this film.

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Here's a quick review: **"Year One"** — don't bother. Taken another way, invert the words, and it only seems like the movie was that long.

Every conceivable kind of bathroom joke is in this film, including one where a character eats poo. Imagine that, another metaphor filmmaker Harold Ramis gives reviewers to use for

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Photographs by Pat Johnson

HIGH BAR: Gallery owner James Steen sits in front of 'Across Barnegat Bay.' Among the large works on display is Luis Bujalance's bold, abstract 'El Impaniente' (below).

From Newtown to Barnegat Light Artist's New Ocean Gallery Realizes a Long-Held Dream

By PAT JOHNSON

It's no secret that many people come to Long Beach Island for the serenity. Once here, they drop the cares of their workaday world and rejuvenate in walks on the beach, listening to the sounds of surf and viewing the soothing sunsets over Barnegat Bay. This is certainly true for James Steen, owner of the new Ocean Gallery in Barnegat Light, which opened during the July 4 weekend.

"When I come over the bridge and see that horizon, I just feel at peace," said Steen, whose Island roots extend back 30 years. In keeping with the theme of relaxation, he offers large, "high-end" works of art chosen for their muted palettes and uncomplicated horizons; many of them he has painted himself.

"As a longtime resident of the Island, I find its beauty and timelessness return to me again and again as I put paint to canvas," said Steen. "My paintings are about the

smell of the Island's air and the sound of its surf. They are about its ever-changing light and the vastness of the sea that laps at its beaches. These are the qualities that bring me back to the Island year after year to refresh and inspire the spirit within me.

"I love huge pieces, and since people

have bigger houses here and have the wall space, I'm pleased to be able to accommodate them," he said.

This is Steen's second gallery; he established Bucks Gallery of Fine Art in Newtown, Pa., in 2000.

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