

TELEVISION PROGRAMMING FOR AUGUST 6-12, 2011

TV The Journal view



The Journal
303 North Minnesota | New Ulm, MN
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Nigel Lythgoe, a real Billy Elliot who reigns on TV

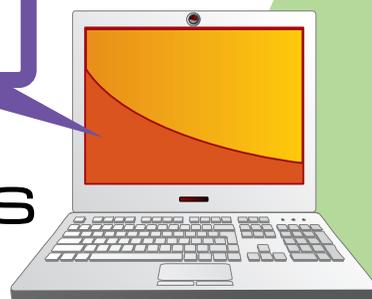
Executive producer Nigel Lythgoe is a judge on "So You Think You Can Dance," which has its season finale Thursday on Fox.

See Page 4 for more details.

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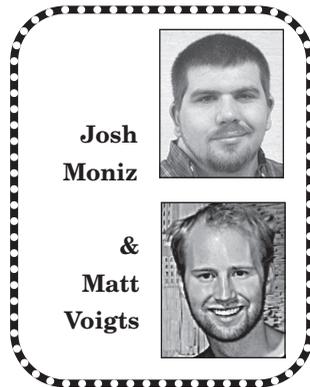
Headline: Cowboys & Aliens

Josh: Fun film gets lost in the desert
Matt: Great acting, boring plot

Josh: Genre films are notorious for being over-run with clichés. But remember — clichés tend to come from good filmmaking. It's just that people liked them so much they copied them until they became lame. However, that overuse can be undone if the clichés are used with a lot of care and love for the genre.

That's what "Cowboys & Aliens" is in a nutshell. It's the director John Favreau's love letter to how much he loves Westerns, and to a lesser extent his love of science fiction action. This film is his attempt at simple, fun, Star War-esque film. He has mixed success.

One thing he does well is get the old-school, good fun Western flavor across. Daniel Craig is fine as the Clint Eastwood anti-hero, though his attempt at an accent drifts in and out. Harrison Ford is great, and he's clearly having fun as the gruff, cruel man with the hint of a heart. Sam Rockwell shows up as a side character with some funny lines. The rest of the



**Josh
Moniz**
&
**Matt
Voigts**

cast is large group of talented actors filling in all the stereotypical cast of Western characters. It gives the film a nice feel when even the bit parts are well acted.

The filming's tempo is steady and fun, moved along by fast and furious film work by Favreau. It's his same that tactics that made "Iron Man" so watchable. He keeps the plot moving by not trying too hard to give an unnecessarily complex explanation to the aliens. He just gives enough to get the point across and allow the film to move on to the next action scene.

The only problem is his approach is too simplified by the end. He did a good job of not boring us with explanation for the aliens, but I think he makes their motive too simple to live up to our expectations.

The cast also suffers from the simplification because it gives them too little to do. The short char-



Daniel Craig in *Cowboys & Aliens*. The hero always gets the best toys.

acterization lets the movie get right into the fun you came to see. But, it leaves you wishing some of the better characters had more screen time.

Matt: In the opening scene of "Cowboys and Aliens," Daniel Craig awakens in the wilderness to find a mysterious bracelet on his wrist. Barely conscious, he hazily attempts to remove it with a rock in a quiet prelude that reinforces through contrast the tension — and action — that is to follow. The movie has the pacing of a 90s alternative rock song — quiet, loud, quiet — and a dry tone that is pleasantly distinct from that of Favreau's "Iron Man" movies. It's a shame that it's the movie's first, alien-free sequence that best captures the movie's

strengths at their purest.

As suggested by Josh, the movie's most entertaining asset — on full display in that opening sequence — is Favreau's willingness to give his actors space and time to play with their characters. At the core is Daniel Craig in full badass mode, a sort of Wild West Jason Bourne — a man with no memory and the fighting skills of a black belt. Harrison Ford plays his Civil War vet equal parts wry, grizzled, and half-senile. Paul Dano and Clancy Brown — both best known for turns as malevolent dustbowl preachers in "There Will Be Blood" and "Carnivale," respectively — also give memorable performances. Dano as a young punk full of incompetence and swagger, and Brown as a likable, humanistic Man of God. The actors

are cast well and many against type — or at least, willing to invest their characters with performances distinct from what they've brought to similar roles.

While the actors are game to try new things, like Josh, I bemoan the plot's lack of detail, which contributes to a general lack of forward momentum. It's great to see all this talent together, but their quest to save the world often has all the urgency of a trip to the grocery store. Favreau is a rarity I appreciate — an actors' director making action movies. While that approach plays to the strengths of the performers, it doesn't help when the reason they're all assembled is neither engaging nor satisfying. The high number of credited writers also suggest the material was re-drafted to impotence long before the cameras rolled.

Josh: I think I can nail down the film's problem: ambition but no follow up. The aliens provide plenty of fun, but they don't add a lot to the plot. Without a willingness to invest more in them, it just makes you wish he had done a straight-up, old-fashioned Western.

Matt: I agree with Josh — without a willingness to take the concept further,

the aliens ultimately feel like a distraction. "Cowboys and Aliens" is guilty of mistaking limited creativity for archetypes, and never quite achieves the fun of 'weird west' entertainments like "The Adventures of Briscoe County, Jr." It feels strange to say that the critically decimated "Priest" — this summer's other sci-fi Western — arguably understood the genres better, even if in many other ways it failed Storytelling 101.

Josh: 6.5/10, Matt: 6/10

Synopsis:

Jake Lonergan awakens in the desert with a strange device strapped to his wrist and no recollection of who he is. When he finds a town, he attempts to piece his memory together while dealing with a variety of good and bad townsfolk. But, when aliens suddenly attack and kidnap people, the town must unite to rescue them.

Starring: Daniel Craig, Harrison Ford, Olivia Wilde and Sam Rockwell

Director: Jon Favreau
 Writers: Roberto Orci, Alex Kurtzman, Damon Lindelof, Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby

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