

## 'Shrek the Third' still has the laughs, but not the same charm

Contributed by Tim Riley  
Sunday, 20 May 2007

### SHREK THE THIRD (Rated PG)

A spate of sequels is already gripping the summer box office, and by the calendar, it's not even summertime yet. Moreover, all these blockbuster sequels are the third installments of now well-established adventures. The next "Pirates of the Caribbean" is sailing into the multiplex in a week. Arriving in early June, "Ocean's Thirteen" requires a bit of math to tell you it's the third installment, and we can only hope it's better than "Twelve";

What this week holds for us is another chapter in the "Shrek" saga, which returns everybody's favorite ogre for some familiar hijinks and comical adventures.

That's the essential problem for "Shrek the Third" — familiarity with the primary characters is so pervasive that expectations run high. As a result, the static comic situations start to wear thin, even if laughs are to be had from not quite original material.

To be sure, Mike Myers brings a great voice and wonderful comic sensibility to the big, lovable green ogre, though the story has little desire or ability to bring something fresh to the scene.

Shrek and his faithful sidekick Donkey (voiced by Eddie Murphy) can only do so much that's the least bit inventive. Fortunately, the deliciously wicked swashbuckler Puss in Boots (Antonio Banderas), possessing a rapier wit, delivers the best one-liners, and though he makes a great verbal sparring partner, you can only wistfully hope for more scenes between Puss and Donkey.

Comfortably settled into domesticity with Fiona (Cameron Diaz), Shrek is much less at ease filling in on royal duties in Far, Far Away for his father-in-law King Harold (John Cleese), who is about to croak and leave the kingdom to the ogre.

Shrek can hardly perform menial ceremonial duties without creating havoc. He's eager to relinquish the crown as soon as a suitable replacement is found. And so Shrek, joined by Donkey and Puss, set out on a quest to find an heir to the throne, and the search ends up at a medieval boarding school where the student body resembles Valley kids hanging out at the mall.

Here, at the Worcestershire Academy, they locate Fiona's long-lost cousin Artie (Justin Timberlake), a dweeb who doesn't fit in at the elite school.

The outcast student is dubious about his royal future, but he finds Shrek persuasive, and besides, anything to get out of this boarding school has to be minimally appealing.

Meanwhile, Prince Charming (Rupert Everett) is suffering the indignity of a failed career at dinner theater, and after drowning his sorrows in a tavern full of fairy tale villains, he assembles a band of thugs, including Captain Hook and Cyclops, to swoop down on the kingdom and stage a coup. With the ogre and his pals away, Charming takes over as easily as the Germans overran France in World War II.

Assisted by the Queen (Julie Andrews), Fiona organizes the fairy tale maidens such as Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty into the Far, Far Away equivalent of the French Resistance. They put up a good fight until Shrek and his furry pals return with the future King Arthur for a showdown with the narcissistic Prince Charming and his army of hired goons.

Since this is all fairy tale stuff, there's little surprise in store for anyone above the kindergarten level.

Oh, I almost forgot, there's another major plot twist, involving the looming fatherhood for Shrek and his absolutely primal fear that a bunch of little ogres running around may be too much to bear.

"Shrek the Third" so faithfully sticks to its formula that few surprises are in store, except perhaps for the very rare audience member unaware of the previous two films. Notwithstanding the recognizable terrain, "Shrek the Third" still manages to deliver a bunch of laughs. But what the story lacks in originality, the film makes up for that shortcoming with brilliantly realized animation.

Now, if only we could get a greatly expanded role for Puss in Boots. Maybe that's our wish for a fourth "Shrek";

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