

'John Carter'—Despite Mega-Budget And Mega-Flop—Offers Mega-Adventure

by Alan Mowbray



Based on Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs' classic novel *A Princess of Mars*, which inspired generations of filmmakers and science fiction writers, including George Lucas, James Cameron, Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury, *John Carter*—with its sweeping scope and \$250-million budget—

was one of the biggest flops in Disney history when it crashed in the box office this spring. Not surprisingly, it's already out on DVD and Blu-ray.

Directed by Andrew Stanton, best known for directing the acclaimed and popular Pixar films *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, the film comes across as a cinematic epic, seeking to rival movies such as *Star Wars* and *Avatar* with its look, feel and storyline.

John Carter tells the story of war-weary, former military captain John Carter (Taylor Kitsch, *Friday Night Lights*), who is an honorable and courageous man. A veteran of the U.S. Civil War, he is broken—tired of fighting for the causes of others. His fighting spirit remains strong, but Carter has turned to self-interest, and he is done with war.

While searching for gold and subsequently getting arrested while trying to fight the 7th Cavalry, Carter is transported—in a twist of fate—to the planet of Barsoom (Mars), where he discovers that his strength and jumping ability is greatly amplified to a superhuman level. He must use these newfound powers to survive the centuries-old war

between the native inhabitants, while trying to save the dying world.

Barsoom is a mysterious and exotic desert planet. At one time, oceans covered the surface, but now only the River Iss remains. There are several races of intelligent life. Heliumites and Zodangans are humanoid and their cities have been at war with each other for so long that it has become a lifestyle.

Dejah Thoris (Lynn Collins), the beautiful, raven-haired princess of Helium, is a passionate advocate for the Heliumites and their way of life. As the regent of the Royal Academy of Science as well as the daughter of the Jeddak (or king) of Helium Tardos Mors (Ciarán Hinds), Dejah's destiny is to rule and fight for her people. Scientifically, she is on the verge of a discovery that could permanently shift the balance of power between her nation Helium and its enemy. But time is running out, and Dejah must convince Carter to enlist in the fight to save Helium from being overrun by Zodanga, a mobile, predator city.

Sab Than (Dominic West), the Jeddak of Zodanga, is handsome, impulsive, arrogant and aggressive in promoting war and conquest as the Zodangan way of life. Given a weapon of unlimited power, he has been chosen by the Therns—a shape-shifting race with advanced technology—to conquer Barsoom.

Carter's first experience with the inhabitants of Barsoom comes in the form of Tharks, a fierce green Martian warrior race who are nine feet tall with four arms and tusks. Tars Tarkas (Willem Dafoe) is the Jeddak of the Tharks. The last vestige of nobility runs in his blood, and he is the only positive influence remaining—keeping the Thark tribe from turning into beasts like the Warhoons, their primitive, gnarled cousins. Blessed with a good sense of humor and patience, Tars Tarkas befriends Carter and gives him the Thark name Dotar Sojat, which roughly translates as “my right arms.”

The foundation of *John Carter* is a familiar one—a story about a stranger in a strange land who has been given a gift, while being thrust into the middle of an epic conflict that will decide the fate of millions. Evil is rising and good must prevail. Carter must choose whether to stay out of it and fight for his own cause or champion a cause for the betterment of others. In his choice, Carter rediscovers his humanity, finding a new purpose for life.

All the inhabitants of Barsoom revere a goddess named Issus. Although in the beginning all things mystical appear to be pointed toward this fictional deity, it appears that the power actually lies in the mysterious race of the Therns, and their ability to harness and control a phenomenon referred to as “blue light.” This spirituality was more of a prop—not the focus of the movie. Although be aware that the name Issus is similar to an ancient cult god Isis, who is worshiped even today.

The bottom line is John Carter is more about making a personal decision to lay down selfish priorities for the benefit of the greater good. The movie transported me to Mars in a way that modified the images I have about the red planet. The depiction of Barsoom is breathtaking and captivating. Yes, there is some CG involved, but a lot of the film was shot in our own Mars-like backyard—Utah. Who would have thought a desert could be so beautiful?

Rated PG-13 for intense sequences of violence and action, John Carter may be too heavy for some ‘tweens with its high-stakes action, mature themes and effects-driven war scenes. DVD and Blu-ray extras include a making-of piece, audio commentary, deleted scenes and bloopers.

Content Watch: *John Carter* is seen mostly shirtless for a majority of the film. The costuming for Princess Dejah Thoris is skimpy at best. The hero and heroine kiss briefly, though honor and virtue are preserved between the two. Besides

intense sequences of violence and action, there is a fractured scene of Carter reliving the deaths of his wife and daughter in his mind, which includes burying them in a hand-dug grave. As far as language, God's name is abused in the first five minutes of the film, and there are some mild expletives.

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