

FEATURE

'A.I.' tale touches on bioethical issues

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Remarkable in many ways, Steven Spielberg's "A.I. Artificial Intelligence" (Warner Bros.) is a visual stunner. Its provocative issues, however, hover as a mist without being truly developed.

Perhaps the difficulty Spielberg had was in writing the screenplay, his first since 1977's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." He tries to meld his preference for warmth and sentiment with the chilly, cerebral sensibility of the late director Stanley Kubrick, who worked on the movie for years before asking Spielberg to direct it. And so we have a visual style and dark foreboding tone reminiscent of many Kubrick movies, yet the story is drenched in Spielbergian childlike emotion and a would-be boy's search for love.

Nonetheless, it has the summer popcorn movies beat by miles as it takes viewers to a future after polar ice caps have melted and flooded coastal cities. Everything is rationed, especially having children, and the only child of Henry (Sam Robards) and Monica Swinton (Frances O'Connor) languishes in cryogenic suspension with a terminal illness.

Henry's boss (William Hurt) and his team, however, have come up with the first robot boy who can be programmed to actually love his adoptive parents. Named David (Haley Joel Osment), the robot is given to the Swintons and, after initial reluctance, Monica opts to connect the emotional circuitry in David's interior that will make him love her unconditionally. The happy mother-son bonding is altered for the worse, however, when the Swintons' real son (Jake Thomas) recovers, returns home, and sees David as a threat.

Abandoned in a forest, the distraught



Warner Bros./CNS

Haley Joel Osment stars in a scene from the film "A.I. Artificial Intelligence." He portrays David, the first robot boy who can be emotionally programmed to give unconditional love to his adoptive parents.

David remembers hearing the story of Pinocchio wanting to become a real boy and looks for the Blue Fairy so he, too, will be real and Mommy will take him back.

Now trying to survive in a nightmarish world where humans enjoy destroying robots, David meets robot Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), and the duo try to evade vicious robot killers and find the Blue Fairy David is convinced exists. Their odyssey is harrowing — and only one survives — into the far distant future where dreams might come true, if only for a day.

Strange and surreal, "A.I." dangles the issues of humanity clashing with technology, men playing God and the problematic nature of love. These are themes that float above the film, instead of taking form and gaining a solid direction in the narrative. "A.I." offers food for thought as bioethicists become increasingly challenged by cloning, genetic engineering and super-sophisticated technology that mimics the human mind in sometimes disturbing ways.

Both a heart-tugging fairy tale and a pitch-black fantasy, the film suffers from

mood swings and its ending is a wispy one indeed. One minute you question what Gigolo Joe adds to the story (plot holes, mostly) and the next minute you are touched by David's complete faith in the power of prayer (to a statue of the Blue Fairy) to make his wish come true. Tawdriness and innocence sure make an odd couple.

The overlit modern settings and unusual angles seem to be a tribute to Kubrick's distinctive style, while the movie's wide sentimental streak is true to Spielberg's penchant for films from the heart.

Due to stylized violence to robots, some sexual innuendo and minimal profanity, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Pare is director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Office for Film and Broadcasting.

Home videos reviewed

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are VHS home videocassette reviews from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Office for Film and Broadcasting. Theatrical movies on video have a USCCB classification and a Motion Picture Association of America rating. Reviews indicate an appropriate age group for audiences.

'Cast Away'

Finely crafted drama in which a harried businessman (Tom Hanks) is transformed after surviving a plane crash that strands him on an uninhabited island for four years before he makes a daring escape in hopes of returning to the woman (Helen Hunt) he loves. With Hanks' superb performance at its center, director Robert Zemeckis' film movingly probes what matters most when someone is stripped of his everyday life and possessions. A violent accident and an instance of profanity. The USCCB classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13 (Fox).

'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'

Thrilling drama set in 19th-century Qing Dynasty China, in which the precious sword of a famed warrior (Chow Yun-Fat) entrusted to a long-time friend (Michelle Yeoh) is stolen and must be recovered at all costs. Although the film is melodramatic in part, director Ang Lee blends mesmerizing martial arts with stunning special effects into a script brimming with intrigue and suspense. Subtles. Martial arts violence and an implied sexual encounter. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. The MPA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13 (Columbia TriStar).

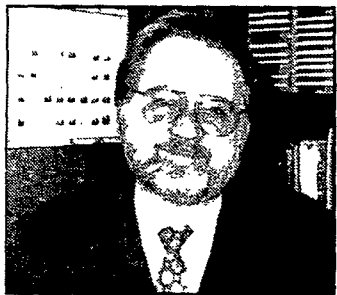
'O Brother, Where Art Thou?'

Dissatisfying comedy about three escaped convicts (George Clooney, Tim Blake and John Turturro) trying to evade their pursuers in 1930s Mississippi, while searching for hidden treasure and ultimately hoping to get home to their families. Loosely based on Homer's epic poem "The Odyssey," director Joel Coen's tuneful film with weak overall impact is more memorable for its few imaginative moments and lush scenery than the obvious humor. Brief violence and intermittent profanity with crass language. The USCCB classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13 (Touchstone).

'Once Upon a Forest'

Animated tale in which three animal youngsters — a hedgehog, a mole and a wood mouse — face dangers in obtaining herbs from a distant meadow, needed to cure their sick hedgehog friend. Director Charles Grosvenor turns in a blandly sweet Hanna-Barbera production that ambles along rather listlessly, save for one highly engaging musical number, "He's Gone — He's Back." Best for the very young. The USCCB classification is A-I — general patronage. The MPA rating is G — general audiences (Fox).

Thoughts to Consider



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