

'I, Robot' deemed fun summer fare

David DiCerto/CNS

NEW YORK — As author Orson Scott Card once observed, "science fiction is one of the few remaining realms of modern culture where serious theological and philosophical reflection can still be practiced."

In "I, Robot" (20th Century Fox), a sleek techno-thriller loosely inspired by a collection of short stories by Isaac Asimov, director Alex Proyas poses the question of whether technology will one day bite the hand that designed it.

The film is set in Chicago in the not-so-distant future. Will Smith plays Detective Del Spooner, a maverick cop with technophobic tendencies and "vintage" tastes — here meaning Converse high-top sneakers, circa 2004. The hybrid sci-fi mystery opens in 2035, when a subservient robotic work force has been integrated into every aspect of society, from walking dogs to delivering FedEx packages.

The cyber-cynical Spooner is called in to investigate the apparent suicide of a renowned robotics spe-

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cialist, Dr. Alfred Lanning (James Cromwell), who allegedly jumped to his death on the eve of the monolithic U.S. Robotics Corp.'s rollout of its newest model, the NS-5 automated domestic assistant.

For reasons not initially clear, Spooner is adamantly skeptical of the company's claim that their robots are hard-wired for cheerful obedience. His gut tells him that Lanning did not take his own life, but was murdered by one of the metallic masses he helped create, a hunch that doesn't sit well with USR's honcho (Bruce Greenwood). His suspicions lead him to a reflective droid named Sonny (voiced by Alan



20th Century Fox/CNS

Will Smith stars in the science fiction thriller "I, Robot."

Tudyk), who is suffering existential angst.

Bridget Moynahan plays Dr. Susan Calvin, a robot psychologist who tries to dispel Spooner's paranoia by assuring him that the 'bots are programmed to serve and protect. She reminds him that they are bound by "the first law of robotics," which states, "A robot may not injure a human being." But as Spooner follows his leads to their all-too-logical conclusion, he discovers that laws, like rules, are made to be broken.

Smith is appealing as the likable Luddite, injecting sensitivity and cocky sarcasm into what could have been a humorless role. But the show belongs to Sonny, the computer-generated robot, who — together with Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy — makes a strong case for a new Oscar category: "best computer-generated performance."

Proyas eschews the noirish atmospherics of past works like "Dark City" and "The Crow" in favor of more techno-realism, integrating Orwellian elements — such as USR's glass citadel and subterranean super-speedways — into his canvas of everyday life, which does not look all that much different from the world as we know it. The result is a believable futurescape that is both boldly visionary yet strangely familiar.

Taking what is essentially a murder mystery and dressing it up in \$100 million worth of cutting-edge special effects, Proyas keeps the narrative briskly paced and never lets the thrill-ride centerpieces overwhelm the story. However, the film

unravels a bit during the protracted climax, succumbing to the siren song of budget-justifying excess.

Despite the fact that most of the gunplay is directed at the rampaging robots, some parents may find the film's video-game brand of violence off-putting. Given the film's PG-13 rating, they may also question the inclusion of a scene, which though not explicit, shows a naked Smith taking a shower. Apparently shower curtains no longer exist in 2035.

Fans of Asimov may be disappointed to hear that "I, Robot" strays far from its source material, bearing only the slightest thematic resemblance to the short stories. Still, for a popcorn movie, it navigates some surprisingly thought-provoking terrain, though many of its ruminations about artificial intelligence and the ensoulment of technology remain philosophical carrots, dangled tantalizingly but never fully explored.

First law of summer movies: You must entertain humans. "I, Robot" does just that.

Due to intense action violence, two brief shower scenes with shadowy profile nudity and recurring crass language, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting 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.

DiCerto is on the staff of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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