

Nick Prescott's Reviews

Beowulf

Talent: Ray Winstone, Anthony Hopkins, John Malkovich, Robin Wright-Penn, Angelina Jolie, Brendan Gleeson.

Date of review: Thursday 29th November, 2007

Director: Robert Zemeckis

Duration: 113 minutes

Classification: M

We rate it: Two stars.

Beowulf, the latest computer-animated blockbuster-wannabe to emerge from Hollywood's studios, is in some ways a follow-up to director Robert Zemeckis' 2004 CGI extravaganza, *The Polar Express*. Zemeckis, who has long held a kind of second-tier monopoly on Hollywood fare beneath Steven Spielberg, has always embraced cutting-edge technology in order to make the special effects in his films as eye-popping as possible. Those of us who are old enough to remember when the original *Back to the Future* was released (in 1985) will attest to the fact that, in its day, that film was about as remarkable for its visual effects as it was for its wildly entertaining story. Zemeckis has had many successes subsequently, from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* to *Forrest Gump* and *Castaway*, and all of them have had their share of behind-the-scenes techno-gimmickry to keep them buzzing. With *Beowulf*, Zemeckis has continued the SFX tradition, and has looked to an extraordinarily old narrative in order to pilfer a storyline: a poem that's roughly 1,000 years old. The results, sadly, are nowhere near as successful as Michael J. Fox in a Delorean time-machine.

Beowulf is based on an epic poem that tells, fittingly, a sweeping story of troubled kings and queens, powerful monsters, resourceful heroes and terrible battles. The original *Beowulf* (which, like many people, I read as a young English student at University) engages in the kind of traditional myth-telling that narrates an epic tale of noble deeds and primal impulses like rage, jealousy and vengeance. Set in a sort of Anglo-Celtic Middle-Europe, the story's central characters include the titular hero, Beowulf, a vicious villain/monster, Grendel, sundry warriors and swordsmen, a troubled King, Hrothgar, and various men- and women-in-waiting. This is the source-material of which truly great films can be made; one only need think of what the great British director John Boorman did with the Arthurian legends in his masterpiece *Excalibur* (1981) to remember how beautifully this kind of story can be told in the cinema. Seeing *Beowulf*, one might wish someone like Boorman had gotten hold of this one.

Zemeckis has hired one of the most inventive and gifted popular writers on the planet to pen the adaptation here: Neil Gaiman, author of *American Gods*, *Neverwhere* and the *Sandman* graphic novels. Gaiman worked on a draft of the *Beowulf* screenplay with Roger Avary (of *Pulp Fiction* fame), modernising the story in many ways and adding numerous subplots and story twists. While the screenplay departs significantly from the source material (which is not always a bad thing, though here many of the changes seem somewhat cynically engineered to attract the attention of a modern, post-Freud audience) what Zemeckis has done with the screenplay makes much of the film unintentionally hilarious.

Early in the film, after our hero has been introduced and the suitably vicious and horrible-looking monster has been revealed, the two do battle in an extended fight sequence. *Beowulf*, wanting to confront the weaponless monster honourably, strips naked and fights in the buff. What ensues is a fight scene in which the filmmakers go to elaborate lengths to conceal *Beowulf*'s genitalia behind strategically-placed sword-hilts, cups, the hands and heads of other characters, pieces of furniture, and lumps of wood. Positively *Austin Powers*-esque in its silliness, this scene signals all that's wrong with *Beowulf*.

In trying to update an epic poem/saga and tune it to the tastes of popcorn-chewing video-game addicts, Zemeckis has done ludicrous violence to the original tale and made his modern adaptation silly in the extreme. With a wonderful voice-cast and the best technology the hundreds of millions of dollars can buy, what he's proven is that all the whiz-bangery in the world doesn't beat a moving, well-crafted story. *Beowulf* for the iPod age is a great disappointment.

Nick Prescott