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# Bows, arrows and a sword: Girls rock this year on film

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 25, 2012

Jennifer Lawrence stars as Katniss Everdeen in "The Hunger Games." (Lionsgate/Murray Close)

2012 is turning out to be a banner year for films with significant female lead characters: warriors, weapons and all.

With an estimated budget of $185 million, the new Pixar/Disney 3-D animated feature, "Brave," opened June 22 and grossed $66 million. Made on half that budget, "The Hunger Games" opened March 25 with a box office of $152.5 million and has brought $400 million in North America and nearly $650 million worldwide. (The DVD is due out Aug. 18.) "Snow White and the Huntsman," made for an estimated $170 million, opened June 3 and has brought in $137 million in the U.S. alone.

For years my mantra has been: The Pixar-Disney partnership needs a heroine. In all the films thus far the women die or are made to look less intelligent than the male heroes. With "Brave" the studio has tried to deliver, but has fallen short. They don't know how to break the hallmark mythic arc mold they have created. The story of a Scots clan teen princess named Merida (voice of Kelly Macdonald) with raging red hair flying across a gorgeous landscape works visually, but the story is poorly crafted. The image of the feminine takes a few more hits.

Merida takes back the power to decide her own fate by pushing against the tradition of an arranged marriage. She whips out her bow and arrow and bests three homely suitors in an archery contest.

But when Merida's mother Elinor (voice of Emma Thompson) does not listen to her appeals, the girl rides off and impetuously, without regard for consequences, gets her mother turned into an Ursus arctos horribilis. Really? Images of Sarah Palin come to mind.

The girl throws her mother under the bus, so to speak, so she can get her own bratty way. I didn't hear Merida apologize to her saintly mother, though the studio, through a publicist, assured me that Merida does so just before she admits the whole mess was her own fault.

This makes her brave? Sure. It takes courage to do the right thing when you've made a huge muddle due to your selfish and impulsive adolescent choices. And it's brave to stand up to being forced into a loveless marriage, though one wonders how really young children will understand this pivotal plot point. I liked Elinor, who selflessly continues to mother her ungrateful teen daughter. If anyone is brave in this story, it is Elinor.

The men in the film are made to look stupid and shallow, though the father, Fergus (voice of Billy Connolly), as physically unappealing as he is, is a good dad.

How does Merida compare with Sulley and Mike in "Monsters, Inc." or Wall-E the robot or Carl and Russell in "Up"? Or even the clueless wandering clownfish Nemo? None of these characters face such dire situations and choices as Merida. And none are as unlikable. It is good to apologize and take responsibility for one's actions, but will the young audience grasp this moral? This gorgeous story pastiche is what happens when a film has three directors and four writers. It makes me wonder how much better the film would have been if Brenda Chapman, the first woman director at Pixar -- and she shares a credit -- had not been "released" from the project in late 2010.

"Snow White and the Huntsman" takes the 300-year-old Brothers Grimm fairy tale and breathes new life into it by turning Snow White (Kristen Stewart) into a fantasy version of Joan of Arc. Snow White even prays the "Our Father" in a church (although there are no Christian symbols in it, the clergy is identifiable). In this version, the Queen, Ravenna (Charlize Theron), is twisted and does evil, but her warped henchman brother, Finn (Sam Spruell), shares the blame for their bad deeds. We find out some backstory for the siblings, that there is an explanation for their terrible actions and ruthless thirst for supreme dominance.

Coming to Snow's aid are the reluctant Huntsman (Chris Hemsworth) and the lovelorn William (Sam Claflin). Both men carry the guilt of having failed the women they loved. Both end up fighting alongside Snow to save the people and the realm. Seven (there were eight but one dies) CGI-manipulated dwarves follow and fight with Snow, too.

"Snow White and the Huntsman" has many themes, including the burden of beauty. Some young women of the realm scar themselves so the queen, and others, will not pursue them for their beauty. It is not difficult to make modern comparisons.

"Snow White and the Huntsman" has potential for romance but shies away from it, preserving a dénouement for at least one sequel that was announced on June 7. I almost wish there would not be a follow-up film. This movie works because it is about idealism, courage and virtue, and offers something to think about without complicating it with romance for the sake of it.

And just when I thought Kristen Stewart could do nothing but pout, as Snow she musters up passion outside the classic boy-girl realm to become the armor-wearing, sword-wielding heroine.

Yet the first female champion to materialize from the pages of a book this year was Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) in "The Hunger Games." Based on a wildly popular novel, the first of a trilogy by Suzanne Collins, the story is set in the near future in an ecologically damaged, war-ruined North America. The people are divided into 12 districts (that we know of) and the farther from the Capitol, the more dire their circumstances. To control the masses and prevent them from rebellion, the totalitarian government puts on a live reality television show, "The Hunger Games." Twenty-four teenagers, a boy and girl from each district, are brought into a kind of ancient Roman gladiator scenario. It is kill or be killed. Only one person can be alive at the end, and the slaughter is broadcast live. Think of "The Hunger Games" as a combination of *Lord of the Flies*, any George Orwell fascist or socialist setup, and "The Truman Show."

Katniss -- a self-trained archer who honed her skills poaching game to feed her starving family -- volunteers to take the place of her little sister, so right away, heroism, laying down one's life for another in an impossible situation, becomes the driving theme.

The premise of "The Hunger Games" is an ethical quagmire that offers much to talk about when it comes to politics, family, the role of entertainment media in our lives, and much more. The next film in the franchise, "Catching Fire," is due out in 2013. (I could not find a release date for the third book-into-film, "Mockingjay.")

If there is one aspect to these three films that I wish were different, it is that all three heroines carried weapons and engaged in violence. Though this worked in the context of the narratives, I wonder about the collective consequence of audiences consuming so many stories that use violence to resolve problems, and where good and evil are too easily defined as a dualism when reality is far more complex.

"Brave," "Snow White and the Huntsman" and "The Hunger Games" are all coming-of-age stories focused on a female character. There are darkness and light and serious choices to be made. Merida is a throwback in some ways to the single heroine struggling to hatch, as it were, from the egg of the usual Disney formulas. But in "Snow White and the Huntsman" and "The Hunger Games," females take the lead to show that men and women

can work together to save themselves and their people, and live a new day in freedom.

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