

Cruise's 'Samurai' thrives on action



Tom Cruise wages war in "The Last Samurai."

WARNER BROS.

review by Daniel J. Stasiewski
a&e editor

There are two different Tom Cruises. One is the serious actor, whose performances in films like "Magnolia," "Born on the Fourth of July" and "Jerry Maguire" were so riveting they made me forget there was a Hollywood icon on the screen. Then there's Cruise the action star. He controls the events and the overall power of the film with his status more than his acting.

In "The Last Samurai," we get a solid action-oriented performance from Cruise. He's a star, not a warrior, much like Mel Gibson in "The Patriot." And with that, "The Last Samurai" is just another action movie. At its best points the film is exciting, but it's mostly melodramatic and formulaic. The grandiose production values create a world that is aesthetically intriguing, but "The Last Samurai" lacks the mellow characterization that creates a thoroughly remarkable film.

Cruise plays Capt. Nathan Algren, an American war vet who was involved in the slaughter of Native Americans during the government's expansion west. Haunted by the memories of his involvement in the vicious massacres, Algren's only comfort is alcohol, and he pays for it by being a spokesperson for the Winchester Rifle Company.

After a particularly bad day at work (shooting the rifle over the heads of audience members), Algren receives a lucrative offer to help out the Japanese military in its modernization. The captain is chosen by a Japanese diplomat, Omura (Masato Harada), for his skill in dealing with the "barbarian red men." It is hoped that his experience will help the Japanese government suppress the Samurai rebellion. Unfortunately, he has to work under Col. Bagley (Tony Goldwyn), an American military commander, who, with Algren, spilled innocent Indian blood.

Algren hates Bagley for his arrogance and ignorance but takes the job anyway. In the first overzealous confrontation, the Samurai warriors easily defeat an ill-prepared Japanese military and Algren is nearly killed. The Samurai chieftain, Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe), however, sees the fire in Algren's fight and takes him back to their village. Once there, Algren must live with the savages he is supposed

to be annihilating and begins to see the way of the Samurai as his only salvation.

Algren goes through a transformation in the Samurai village, but it's the kind of miraculous change of heart, from alcoholic contract killer to honorable Samurai hero, that I mentioned in my review of "Master and Commander." The change is so blatant that Cruise's character, though still not flawless, achieves picture perfect redemption. He almost does it gracefully, but a heartfelt transformation, along with the rest of the film, is thwarted in part by distracting narration. The voiceovers add useless introspection to Cruise's already clear, if silent, performance and undercut cinematographer John Toll's transcendent images.

Director Edward Zwick says that Akira Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai" inspired him early on in life and set him up to become a filmmaker. Watching "The Last Samurai," I'd say there's more Richard Donner in this film than Kurosawa. The film centers on the action and allows the more intimate scenes to be marred by its overwhelming cheesiness.

Beyond the melodrama, the film has certain technical achievements. I admired its ambitious scale and the magnificent period design. Just seeing a person wearing Samurai armor is an awe-inspiring image. It's unfortunate that the film fails to achieve emotionally what it does technically.

I don't know if there is a bit of historical accuracy to this film, and truthfully I don't care. If a film doesn't at least make me believe it could have happened, it doesn't matter if it did or didn't. As far as I'm concerned "The Last Samurai" is so dramatic and so cinematic, for the sake of anyone actually involved in such a rebellion, I hope there isn't a shred of truth to this story. "The Last Samurai" is fun and exciting, but that's what I would expect from a "Rush Hour" sequel, not a genuine epic.

"The Last Samurai," directed by Edward Zwick and starring Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe, is now playing at Tinseltown and the Eastway Plaza Cinemas.



Slaves bring hard rock with clean message

by Greg Smith
contributing writer



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Metal band Slaves On Dope will perform at the State Street Tavern on Thursday.

Many times nowadays there are negative connotations attached to modern bands, especially bands specializing in hard rock and metal. Stories of drug use and alcoholism, wild parties and flamboyant lifestyles float around the music industry. Lately, it's refreshing to see a band whose music brings a positive message with it, a band with strong convictions that isn't changed by the ever powerful influences of success and the dollar sign.

Mainstream hard rock band Slaves On Dope personifies the ideas mentioned above while continuing to build a fan-base and gaining critical acclaim. Judging by the band's web site, the four Canadian rockers seem to be laid-back, down-to-earth guys who love to play Playstation and watch hockey as much as they love their music and displaying it on stage. And their strong no-drugs-and-alcohol stance is one easily found in their music, but is much harder to find among people who share their profession today.

SOD draws from a wide range of influences, from hard rock legends Led Zeppelin and AC/DC to bands like Depeche Mode and Stone Temple Pilots, and even some unexpected performers, like Fiona Apple and Marvin Gaye.

The band, which consists of bassist Frank Salvaggio, percussionist Rob Urbani, vocalist Jason Rockman, and guitarist Kevin Jordine, has successfully mixed said influences into its music on its much-awaited album entitled "Metafour." While listening to a sampler of a few tracks from the album, it's easy to see that SOD is passionate about its music and its message.

The tracks weave powerful, low-end guitar riffs from Jordine and Salvaggio's throbbing bass lines with emotional and telling lyrics from vocalist Rockman. The driving force of the band, though, is drummer Urbani, who throws out full-force beats and edgy fills on tracks like

"Go." SOD mixes it up on the album, satisfying hard-core fans with songs like "Poster Boy" and giving fans a taste of their softer side with the standout track, "So Clear," a song that mixes acoustic and hard, distorted guitar for a pleasant surprise.

Rockman sings from the heart about love, risk-taking, and alcohol abuse, to name a few issues ("Want to give you the honest answer / Want to tell you how much I care / Want to give you what you've given me"). While covering a range of vocal stylings including a thrashing scream and spoken word, Rockman's great clean voice works best on SOD's tunes.

The band also loves the live-life, and as Jardine puts it on SOD's web site, "the stage is where it all happens." SOD has had a pretty illustrious touring career so far, supporting the likes of hard-rock staples Papa Roach, Soulfly, Linkin Park, and Fear Factory. After moving to L.A. in 1999, the band met Sharon Osbourne and was asked to play the prestigious OzzFest in 2000 and 2001.

SOD is currently in the middle of a U.S. club tour, and will be making a stop at Erie's State Street Tavern on Thursday. The show will feature local bands Criminally Insane, Self Inflicted, Crawl and Waiting For Never, a band composed of former members of Scud and OSB. The show is all ages and starts at 8 p.m.

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