

TOM'S TOMFOOLERY OF CINEMA

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Ladder 49 **** 1/2

Touchstone Pictures presents a film directed by Jay Russell. Starring Joaquin Phoenix, John Travolta. Written by Lewis Colick. Running time 120 minutes. Rated PG-13 for intense fire and rescue situations and language.

In an age where firefighters, policemen, and Emergency Medical Teams are deemed heroes in their communities, it is only fitting that Hollywood would make films showing their courage, bravery, and integrity. Jay Russell's latest film *Ladder 49* is the story of Jack Morrison (Joaquin Phoenix) and his trials and tribulations as a fire fighter at his fire station. The story follows him from his first day at the station to his promotion to ladder rescue. Morrison has an impressive dedication to his job, always the first one down the pole when the alarm blares ready for the dangers that await him. The film asks both in dialogue and in its photography how are firefighters

able to go in to a burning building when everyone else is trying to get out? Morrison answers the question by telling everyone from his wife and children to the stranger on the street that his job saves lives.

John Travolta plays Chief Michael Kennedy, a veteran firefighter carrying the family legacy of fighting fire. He becomes a father figure for Morrison, teaching him important survival techniques and assuring him that he is doing a great job. Other supporting cast includes Morrison's wife, Linda (Jacinda Barrett), children, and the other fighters in the station. Each of them, especially Linda, act in order to show the hardships of fire fighting on the domestic side as well as the occupational side.

Travolta and Phoenix worked well with each other. They did not compete for the spot light and showed a very touching father/son type of relationship. The film focuses solely on family, either Morrison's family at home or the one at the firehouse.

The visual effects in this film were impressive. There were obvious instances where the

crew could not use actual fire so digital fire was added, but it is seamless and impressive. The crew also got special permission in Baltimore to ignite an abandoned building which looked horrifying at its first appearance in the film.

The film depicts the horrors and trauma fire has on the fighters, their families, and the victims of the fires. Firefighters put their lives on the line every time the alarm blares, and the courage required of these men and women that "are just doing their job," hardly gets recognized.

Colick and Russell worked very hard with the screenplay and the direction to make this a more glorified drama than an action flick like *Backdraft*. Colick's screenplay told a very specific story that used fire only as just another day on the job. The film required special training and stunt work, but did not let these tools take away from the plot. Everything that is seen when fires are being fought looked authentic and real. Unlike *Backdraft*, which was about the fire, *Ladder 49* is about the firefighters - and that is a much more interesting story to tell.



Photo courtesy of Yahoo Images

Joaquin Phoenix and John Travolta star in Jay Russell's "Ladder 49." The film depicts the story of Jack Morrison, a firefighter, as he experiences the trials and tribulations of fighting fire.

Descendants front man, scientist by day, rock star by night

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The Descendents have enjoyed a prolific musical career spanning over twenty-five years. Fueled by rejection, coffee, and girls, the music of the Descendents has been credited as originating the pop-punk sound. In 1982, they released their third album, the now classic *Milo Goes to College*. The title was a true indication of lead singer Milo Aukerman's academic intentions. Throughout his college career, Aukerman and the band continued to pump out classic albums and ferocious live shows. Aukerman talked candidly about his experience with graduate school and dual careers as research scientist and rock star.

Aukerman, probably the only punk rock icon with a Ph.D. in Plant Molecular Genetics, has been working as a research scientist for technology powerhouse DuPont since 2001. Aukerman's area of research reflects DuPont's interest in developing corn hybrids and

plants with novel properties which they market to farmers, putting great effort into identifying genes that control important crop traits. He attributed his direction in grad school to an interest in DNA and genes and says that he has spent his scientific career studying the beauty of DNA.

Aukerman talked about the origins of the band and his desire to go to college.

"The two things blossomed at the same time," said Aukerman. "I joined the band in my junior year of high school. I also kind of had an inkling that I would end up in science. I can trace it back to a book report I did on DNA. My dad was a physicist so I always had an affinity for science. It is just ironic that my obsession with genes started at the same time as my obsession with punk rock."

Aukerman discussed a period of time where he felt he had to decide between the two passions to pursue in the long term, and he decided that college was the best choice. "Looking back, I thought I was making the decision to leave music behind, but music seems to keep reeling me back in. I'd go to college and forget about music but it's kind of

like a drug. You can't shake yourself of the habit," he said.

Aukerman said that his band mates were completely supportive of his decision to go to college.

"It's just what friends do," he said. "They emotionally supported me while I went through my trials and tribulations in science and I supported them as they went through their trial and tribulations as musicians."

Punk rock and science are not often mentioned in the same sentence. A research scientist operating under a punk rock persona might not have much luck professionally because the punk attitude does not necessarily lend itself to the seriousness demanded of scientific professionals. Aukerman talked about how he managed his dual personas.

"It's impossible to balance those identities," he said. "I tend to shift back and forth from one to the other. If I'm going to be shifting into music mode, it's something that has to occur for a long period of time, like a year or six months. I can't one day be a musician and one day be a scientist because it's impossible to get anything done that way."

Aukerman said that ideally, it would be great to juggle between the both of them but it does not seem to work out for him. "I have to break off chunks of time for one and shift and do the other one independently," he said.

Aukerman said that the Descendents' lasting power has always been a mystery to him. He offered a few thoughts that might be considered factors in their longevity.

"There has been a resurgence of pop-punk ever since *Green Day* hit the scene," he said. "That [kind of] legitimized that style and, for better or worse, we have been recognized as one of the founding bands to make that kind of music." Aukerman continued on that the band has a "mythical status" that surrounds them, which they consider silly. "But if people want to perceive us as inventors, so be it."

Aukerman also described the bond that he shares with his band members. "We're always willing to drop everything and come to each other's support, so we never had a blowout breakup where it's like 'we never want



The Descendents entertain a crowd of enthusiastic punk rock fans. With fingers held high in praise of the music, the Descendents are known to perform with high energy.

to see you again'. We usually put out a record every five years. There's something to be said for tried and true friendships that have breathing room," he said. "People also seem to recognize our music as having more lasting power than other more trend oriented music. It's important that new bands are naming us as influences, which also keeps us relevant."

Aukerman said that the band's legendary status is gratifying but remains humble. He said that he is simply thankful that people are still enjoying the band's music and plans to put out future records.

"The way that we have operated for many years now has been completely ad hoc," said Aukerman. "All it requires is a phone call. We're not locked into any expectations from a record company so there's no record company saying 'you owe us a record'. I don't feel locked into any expectations from listeners, either. Every time I feel like I want to write some music it's because I want to do it. You have to go wherever the creativity takes you."

Aukerman has a wife and two young children. All of the

Descendents have families and careers outside of the band. Because of this, touring is an even more complicated endeavor than putting out an album. Aukerman said that the music now has become a very gratifying hobby.

With the presidential election around the corner, Aukerman spoke out as to where he stands. "I need to know more specifics, but I do know that I can't vote for Bush with any good conscience," said Aukerman. "I'm not really that political so I can't come up with anything particularly astute to say other than I hate him. I'll probably be voting Democrat."

As far as Aukerman's future in science, he said that he is in a transitional period right now where he is segueing from being a research scientist to becoming a research manager.

"It allows me more freedom to do research in a creative manner," said Aukerman of his new position at DuPont.

Aukerman said that he looks forward to making music for his kids, one of which can now point out his dad on an old Descendents poster in the basement.

ed in pursuing science, Aukerman offered some sound advice.

"There is a crossroads you come to when you finish your undergrad degree," said Aukerman. "I look back at going to grad school as a very rewarding experience. Ultimately, in the end, it was good for my career development. But it took me a while to get to that perspective. Grad school is very challenging and you don't always see the light at the end of the tunnel." He said that any grad school student needs to realize that a Ph.D. is not "the be-all-and-end-all." "It's just the thing that gets your foot in the door. In my field, once you have a Ph.D., you have to prove that you can do good independent research. A Ph.D. doesn't necessarily solve all your problems. There's probably plenty of examples of people who got their Ph.D.s and are now driving taxis. You have to keep your eyes open during grad school and start to map out what you want to do after grad school and have realistic expectations," he said.

You can check out The Descendent online at www.descendentsonline.com.



Photos courtesy of The Descendents Web site

The Descendents record a song for their last album.