

Action, excitement, Keanu Reeves and a bus 'Speed' has it all

By David Thorn
Oregon Daily Emerald

With the nation's best box office results last weekend, the last thing Keanu Reeves' newest movie *Speed* needs is a ringing endorsement from me.

But I don't have any choice. *Speed* is one of the best action films to come out of Hollywood in years, and seems likely to be one of the summer's biggest blockbusters.

The real strength of the movie lies not in breaking new ground, but in making the most of the action genre, and by avoiding many of the pitfalls that often plague lesser quality action movies. *Speed* manages to avoid some of the Hollywood contrivances that moviegoers are most annoyed by.

In *Speed*, Reeves plays a cocky (what else?) L.A. cop named Jack Traven, assigned to an elite crisis task force, who runs up against an anonymous mad bomber played by Dennis Hopper. Much of the action takes place on a city bus, which Hopper's character has rigged to explode if it ever drives less than 50 miles an hour, and which Reeves, not entirely by accident, ends up having to save from destruction.

One of the problems that action films often have is a totally unrealistic premise (*Universal Soldier*, anyone?). At first glance, the plot of *Speed* also seems to suffer from this affliction. (When I first saw the movie's big cardboard display at the theater, with a bus leaping through flames behind Reeves' stoic face, I laughed out loud. I mean, come on! A bus?!)

But somehow, the movie manages to pull it off. Credit for that has to go to the screenplay, the



Keanu Reeves (above), tries to catch up (on foot) with a runaway bus. Sandra Bullock and Reeves (inset) maneuver in and out of L.A. traffic trying to avoid imminent danger.



director, Jan de Bont, and to Reeves himself. Reeves is much more in his element here in an action film than he ever was doing more serious drama. Seeing him in this movie almost made me forget the embarrassing performances he delivered in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and Kenneth Branagh's otherwise superb version of Shakespeare's

Much Ado About Nothing.

Another way this movie shines is in Sandra Bullock, who plays Annie, the bus rider who gets recruited to drive the bus while Reeves goes about all his heroics. She forms a realistic romantic interest for Reeves, and doesn't just seem to be "thrown in" to make the movie

more profitable at the box office.

Some films will twist and warp the plot of a movie just to sneak in a romantic interest for the hero. The most absurd example of this came in *Under Siege*, a Steven Seagal vehicle which, despite taking place on a battleship where no women were stationed, still managed to find a

way to work in a bimbo to tote a gun with Seagal.

In contrast, Bullock's role in the movie was believable, and most of her part, with a few obvious exceptions, could have easily been played by a man.

The movie's screenplay borrows heavily from live theater, as the action is divided into three distinct acts: the first act taking place in a high-rise office building, the second on the bus, and the third on a subway.

After each act, there is a relaxation of the tension, which is followed by another crescendo of excitement, which is again followed by a release.

Every action movie attempts to do this — it practically defines the genre — but many resort to the cheap Hollywood cop-out of repeatedly resurrecting the villain. Many movies will lull the audience into thinking the movie is over by killing off the bad guy, only to have him miraculously arise from sure death over and over again (Jean-Claude Van Damme films are particularly bad for that).

In *Speed*, the villain dies once, and he dies well. (Well, there is this time early in the movie when we think he might have blown himself up ... oh, nevermind.)

The real key to an action movie's success is taking us as far to the edge of disbelief as possible without pushing us over. There is one scene in the middle of *Speed* that makes that mistake — those who see the movie will know what I mean. And there just isn't quite the humor of the truly great action movies, like *Die Hard*, *Terminator 2* and the *Indiana Jones* trilogy. But other than that, the movie is a wild and woolly ride, fully worthy of three and a half stars.

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