

The Really Big Universe

Douglas Adams' genius now on the big screen

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY:

Directed by Garth Jennings. Screenplay by Douglas Adams and Karey Kirkpatrick, based on the book by Douglas Adams. Produced by Nick Goldsmith, Jay Roach, Jonathan Glickman, Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum. Executive producers, Douglas Adams, Robbie Stamp, Derek Evans. Cinematographer, Igor Jadue-Lillo. Production design, Joel Collins. Editor, Niven Howie. Costume design, Sammy Sheldon. Music, Joby Talbot. Starring Martin Freeman, Sam Rockwell, Mos Def, Zooey Deschanel, Bill Nighy, with Warwick Davis, Richard Griffiths, Anna Chancellor, Alan Rickman, Helen Mirren, Stephen Fry, Thomas Lennon and John Malkovich. Touchstone Pictures, 2005. PG. 108 minutes.

I first heard Douglas Adams' inventive, irreverent sci-fi classic, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, on KLCC, which ran the show (possibly the BBC version) as a serial over consecutive weekends during the late 1970s. My daughter and I loved it. The great voices and sound effects were creative and unusual, and if we missed one week, we just picked it up the next. I haven't read Adams' well-loved books, and I imagine the time is well past when I might, but I respect his iconoclastic, generous and humorous vision. Adams died of a heart attack in May 2001 at age 49, after completing a second draft of the screenplay for the film.

I don't know what to call the yet unnamed genre this unusual film falls into. It's a non-ironic human comedy brewed with intelligence. Warped sci-fi hardware provides the opening for absurd play and mischievous philoso-

phy. At least two of my favorite movies from last year, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *I Heart Huckabees*, exhibit similar characteristics but substitute time-travel and existential psychology for *Hitchhiker's* deep space travel.

In films such as these, plot plays a less acute role than in more straightforward narratives. Characters may look alien, such as the

Vogon Jeltz (Richard Griffiths), a lumbering, thick-skinned super-clerk whose human aptitude for ensuring that all acts are authorized and signed in triplicate is regrettable but true. Think of him as your inner control freak. Conversely, characters may look human such as Ford Prefect (Mos Def) but come from the vicinity of Betelgeuse. Perhaps because Ford has spent 15 years on Earth as an out-of-work actor, he seems warmly human.

The two for-real humans, Arthur Dent (Martin Freeman) and Trillian (Zooey Deschanel), meet on Earth and meet again in space, or rather on the spaceship Trillian shares

with her new beau, Zaphod Beeblebrox (Sam Rockwell). Zaphod passes for human, at least at first. He dresses like a time-warped rock star but has a contemporary ego that is Dubya-like. He hails from Betelgeuse Five and is the President of the Galaxy. Turns out Zaphod and Ford Prefect are double first-cousins or something complicated like that.

Other characters worth noting are Humma Kavula (John Malkovich), a former rival of the President's who brings out his worst — a second head (in place of his neck), which is as close to egoistic malevolence as the story gets. Zaphod makes a promise, but Humma keeps

Z's extra head just in case. Slartibartfast (Bill Nighy) is an engineer who really likes to design new planets. Marvin (Warwick Davis) is a Genuine People Personality Robot. Marvin is depressed. Like I said, some of aliens are humorously human-like. The narrator is voiced by Stephen Fry, while Helen Mirren is the Voice of Deep Thought.

Thoroughly entertaining, *Hitchhiker's Guide* may have been de-thorned by Disney to get a PG rating, but it is not stripped of its core goodness. The worst punishment any monster comes up with is pretty mild: The condemned must listen as a Vogon recites really bad poems. Suitable for all ages but smart enough for parents and other adults, the film is highly recommended. It's now playing at Cinema World and Cinemark. **EW**

Marvin (Warwick Davis), Zaphod Beeblebrox (Sam Rockwell), Ford Prefect (Mos Def) and Arthur Dent (Martin Freeman).



LAURA SPARHAM, TOUCHSTONE PICTURES, 2005.



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