



MOVIES

## A Not So Super Hero

*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is the coolest movie ever ... at least for the first half-hour.

BY DAVID EDELSTEIN

**A**T FIRST the crazy-quilt inventiveness of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* can put you over the moon: Yes, this is how you bring a graphic novel to life onscreen! The British director Edgar Wright made *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*, and he understands the healthy connection between ordinary dreamers and their huge, melodramatic, movie-infused dreams. He takes Bryan Lee O'Malley's Canadian mangas (in which the mundane meets the superheroic) and concocts a syntax all his own: part comic panel, part arcade video game—from the era of Pac-Man and Galaxian and Space Invaders, before virtual reality killed so much of the fun. The anarchic Warner Bros. cartoonist turned feature director Frank Tashlin (*Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*) would have been too happy watching Wright at play: Locations feature pop-up “fun facts,” sounds come with illustrative words (“ding dong!”), a smooch triggers pink hearts. And that’s before the 22-year-old slacker-guitarist Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera) becomes a ker-pow-ing superman above the stages of Toronto’s rock clubs.

Nothing, by the way, explains his sudden surge of superheroism: no gamma rays or mutant spider bites. The rest of the time, pathetic Scott shares a mattress in a crummy dive with his gay friend (Kieran Culkin) and dates (i.e., almost holds hands with) a high-school girl named Knives Chau (the touchingly buoyant Ellen Wong)—until he glimpses the magenta-haired deadpan punk Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) and, pursuing her, finds himself under siege by a string of jealous exes (seven, to be precise), usually while his band is playing. This is kung-fu fighting of the flying, flinging, wall-shattering sort, sometimes broken up by songs, guitar riffs, and, in one scene, a kick-line of demon hipster chicks. The screen splits horizontally: Scott rockets from right to left on top while his adversary barrels from left to right below—and when they meet, the frames explode and merge in a shower of sparks. The spectacle is outlandish, yet it’s somehow in sync with what rockers feel at their most transcendent. The guitars here throw bolts at the sky.

Given these marvels, why doesn't *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* send you home on a high? Why isn't it *the coolest movie ever*? One problem is, well, Scott Pilgrim. Cera dials down his patented semi-castrato hys-

teria and doesn't play every scene on the defensive, but our superhero is still a super-cipher: callow, cowardly, morose. Some of those traits come from the graphic novel, but they don't work onscreen as well as, say, Enid's determined anti-enthusiasm in the film of Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (which only just worked). It's amusing when Cera barely manages to jilt the smitten Knives (“We should break up ... or whatever”), but a tremulous creep is still a creep. He hardly seems worthy of Winstead's Ramona, who gets an enchanting guitar intro courtesy of Frank Black's “I Heard Ramona Sing” and inspires the film's most lyrical sight gag: As she roller-skates into the night, the snow glows and melts under her board.

Does Wright feel any connection to this milieu? I doubt it. His other movies are movie-ish, but they work from the inside out: The Romero-like zombie plague of *Shaun of the Dead* is a horrific extension of provincial middle-class English complacency, of a world Wright knows intimately. *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is an outside-in kind of exercise. It's ravishing, but the emotional stakes never seem very high. Nothing much is made of the supporting characters, among them Anna Kendrick as Scott's dismissive sister. And the parade of supervillain exes—including Brandon Routh and Jason Schwartzman—is like a forced march; I felt I'd had my fill of the fights and there were still five exes to go. (Fortunately, numbers five and six turn out to be twins.)

The film is repetitive, top-heavy: Wright blows his wad too early. But a different lead might have kept you laughing and engaged. Cera doesn't come alive in the fight scenes the way Stephen Chow does in the best (and most Tashlin-like) of all the surreal martial-arts comedies, *Kung Fu Hustle*. And Wright doesn't have what Tashlin had in Bob Hope in *Son of Paleface*—a meta-comedian who could comment on the sundry absurdities. Cera is a superhero for an indecisive generation, which might work if the disjunction were played for satire. But it's just a disjunction. Scott Pilgrim needs too much help from video games to *really* save the world.

THE 17-YEAR-OLD protagonist, “J” (James Frecheville), of the Australian crime drama *Animal Kingdom*, is also more inexpressive than I'd have liked, although the movie would be less bloodcurdling if its hero didn't stand there, mouth open like an imbecile, while the horrors around him go down. From the first shot, in which he's sprawled on a sofa beside his mom and staring at the TV, J reveals nothing; only when the cops show up do we realize she's dead from an overdose. J phones his estranged grandmother, Smurf (Jacki Weaver), who arrives with her heels and bleached hair and enfolds

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him in her ample bosom. Gradually, we come to understand why J's mom, however drug-addled, acted wisely to keep her son and her family far apart.

They're sociopaths, a crime family—Mom, three sons, and a close mate. And the local police are just as wild. Apart from a stuporous hero, what makes *Animal Kingdom* more nihilistic than its genre counterparts is the almost complete lack of justice, of cause and effect, of anything but naked displays of dominance. The most likable character is offed early—for no reason—by cops; the criminals' revenge for that death is on a pair of innocent patrol officers. The one decent detective (Guy Pearce) says the right things but is utterly impotent. Tribal allegiances are all—and even they can be suspect.

Early on, writer-director David Michôd serves up *Trainspotting*-like tricks and narration that is beguiling, if rarely apropos. But the actors are something. Weaver is seductively maternal when it suits her, but with a chillingly Darwinian view of her progeny. We hear about the eldest and most psychotic son, Pope (Ben Mendelsohn), before we see him, and his first appearance is deceiving: He's small, with a weak chin. Soon, of course, we realize that it's the weak-looking ones who'll do anything to compensate. Toward the end of the film there's a heavily sexualized murder that I found too upsetting and disgusting for the movie to bear. Good as *Animal Kingdom* is, it's not deep or illuminating enough to carry the weight of that particular death. It is good enough to bear the weight of the memorable last line: "It's a crazy fucking world."

PATRICIA CLARKSON is usually so "on" that it's a surprise to see her play a melancholy, passive woman—and play her with such airy, elegiac grace. In Ruba Nadda's *Cairo Time*, she's the wife of a U.N. official; she arrives in Egypt to find him stuck in a Gaza refugee camp under mysterious circumstances. Ogled and accosted by Egyptian men, she drifts closer to her husband's colleague (forlorn Alexander Siddig). They don't talk much, but they fall into an easy, intimate rhythm. Will they ...? Won't they ...? Like most good travel movies, the physical movement is in turn with the movement of the soul. Think *In the Mood for Love* with hookahs instead of chopsticks. ■

POP

## His Pet Sound

### Beach Boy Brian Wilson takes on his musical hero, George Gershwin.

BY AARON GELL

**H**ARD-CORE BEACH BOYS fans—a more high-strung bunch than you might expect, what with all those good vibrations—are about to get rained on. "No," Brian Wilson says flatly when asked about cousin-band-mate-antagonist Mike Love's assertion that Wilson would rejoin the band for a 50th anniversary reunion tour.

But never mind. The surf-sound mastermind has landed a new collaborator, and he's proving considerably easier to work with: George Gershwin. Wilson's new record, *Brian Wilson Reimagines Gershwin*, may be the summer's most stunning mash-up, a marriage of two of popular music's most influential and well-loved composers—New York sophistication meets SoCal rapture—that casts both in a new light. Tackling everything from standards ("It Ain't Necessarily So," "Someone to Watch Over Me") to little-known rarities, Wilson has created gorgeous and unexpected arrangements that strip away decades of familiarity. "They're unlike anything I've heard before," says Adam Gershwin, George and Ira's great-nephew, who helps manage George's estate. "But I would expect nothing less from Brian."

Wilson was around 5 years old when he first heard "Rhapsody in Blue." "All I remember is I loved it," he says. And when he began writing his own music, it was Gershwin who "inspired me to write good harmonies." Adam Gershwin believes his great-uncle and Brian to be kindred spirits. "They each had success early in their careers, and in both cases they not only transcended the fairly limited genres they were working in but expanded into a much wider range of musical expression, with 'Rhapsody in Blue' and 'Good Vibrations.'" Of course, they also both collaborated closely with siblings—though, as Adam notes, the similarity ends there. "I'm not sure Brian had quite the same relationship with Carl and Dennis that George and Ira did," he says of the Wilson clan's troubles and fallout.

Wilson began the project with a careful study of Gershwin's catalogue, including more than 100 forgotten or unfinished pieces, which he listened to over and over until he got to what he believed to be each composition's essence. "On 'I Got Rhythm,' I wanted to make it sound like that guy really loves that gal," explains Wilson, who, after years of seclusion, has been expanding his public appearances for the past decade. "Or on 'Summertime,' I wanted to make it sound like it really was about summertime. I tried to put so much emotion and feeling into it, to really do justice to the music, so people would think, *Hey, Wilson really knows what's going on with Gershwin.*" To illustrate his point, he breaks into song, which is how he has always communicated best. "I loves you Por-geee, don't let him take me," he croons. Even at 68, his voice is redolent with innocence and longing. "Don't let him handle me, and drive me mad ..." ■

BRIAN WILSON REIMAGINES GERSHWIN DISNEY PEARL SERIES, \$15.98.

