

Tolkien trilogy concludes with fitting finale

By Kam Williams

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Clocking in at 3 hours and 20 minutes (not counting the 15 minutes or so of trailers immediately preceding the "feature presentation"), "The Lord of the Rings 3: The Return of the King" is a full-length picture in the truest sense of the term. Any review of this protracted conclusion of the Tolkien trilogy really ought to start with the movie's rather high squirm index.

For, to be honest, an unfortunate by-product of the protracted time commitment is an unusually restless audience, evidenced by a rather distracting increase in concession and restroom traffic during the screening.

That disclaimer out of the way, "The Lord of the Rings 3," nonetheless, remains highly recommended as a wondrous, worthwhile spectacle, a fitting capstone on the J.R.R. Tolkien epic. Thus, another round of Oscar accolades is in order for the final installment.

The first garnered 13 Academy Award nomina-



"The Return of the King," the final installment in the "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy has been a hit at the box office.

tions, winning four, while the second landed six, winning two.

Director Peter Jackson deserves some special sort of acknowledgement for having had the foresight to film all three episodes simultaneously.

This better enabled him to sew nine-plus hours of cellu-

loid seamlessly into a magnificent fantasy ever so faithful to the vision of Tolkien's source material.

The Return of the King's stellar ensemble cast includes Elijah Wood as Frodo the Hobbit; Sean Astin as his best friend Sam; Ian McKellen as Gandalf the Wizard; Viggo Mortensen as heir-apparent

Aragorn; Liv Tyler as Arwen, his love interest; Cate Blanchett as Galadriel; Hugo Weaving as Elrond; Orlando Bloom as Legolas the Elf; John Rhys-Davies as Gimli the Dwarf; and Andy Serkis as the mercurial Gollum.

And of equal import is the cutting-edge technology employed to breathe life into the

computer-generated characters and other images also sharing the screen. Taking up where "The Two Towers" left off, this bifurcated finale unfolds as a pair of parallel dramas which ultimately dovetail together imperceptibly.

One branch follows Gandalf's attempt to rally Gondor's dispirited, rag-tag

army and other brave forces for a final showdown with the legions of darkness. The other, meanwhile, traces fearless Frodo's perilous trek with loyal Sam and the mysterious Gollum across treacherous enemy environs in order to toss the Ring into the fires of Mount Doom forever.

The elaborate battle scenes, replete with sweeping vistas of castles and moats and endless legions of foot soldiers being dispatched in hand-to-hand combat, stand in sharp contrast with Frodo's more tranquil, yet very scary sojourn which is frightening in its own right. Somehow, the constant shifting between wholesale bloodletting and this relatively intimate terror make for an absolutely absorbing adventure which establishes the Lord of the Rings saga as perhaps the best mythmaking fable ever brought to the big screen.

Oh, if only they made movies like this when I was a child.

Excellent (4 stars).

Rated PG-13 for epic battle sequences and for frightening images.

Family, friends support Jackson at Neverland Ranch

LOS OLIVOS, Calif. (AP) - Friends and relatives of Michael Jackson descended on his Neverland Ranch on Saturday to show their support for the entertainer who is fighting child molestation charges.

The private gathering behind the gates of the sprawling estate was described as a homecoming for Jackson, who has kept a low profile in Las Vegas and undisclosed locations since surrendering to authorities on Nov. 20 and being released on \$3 million bail.

"This event is to show Michael that he has the love and support of his friends and family," Jackson's spokesman Stuart Backerman told reporters outside the estate.

The gathering - titled "You Are Not Alone" after a Jackson song - drew about 600 people, including celebrities such as tennis star Serena Williams, rapper MC Hammer, comedian Eddie Griffin and "American Idol" host and DJ Ryan Seacrest.

More than 450 cars entered the main gate of the estate. Fans ran up to a Black Mercedes that carried two people who appeared to be Jackson's parents.

About 20 reporters staked out the gate, along with a



Jermaine Jackson, right, brother of Michael Jackson speaks while Larry King, left, and Michael Jackson's attorney, Mark Geragos, listen during the taping of "Larry King Live" in Los Angeles on Thursday, Dec. 18. Child molestation charges were filed against Michael Jackson in Santa Barbara. Jackson has gone on record refuting the charges.

dozen fans. One sign pasted on a car read, "Michael is innocent!! Leave him alone!!"

Guests characterized the mood inside as upbeat.

Musician Edwin Birdsong said Jackson was subdued as various supporters honored him.

"He just said 'Hi,' and smiled," Birdsong told reporters as he left Neverland. "It was very festive and happy."

A gospel choir led by Andrae Crouch performed, Birdsong said. Other celebrities included actor Robert

Townsend and former baseball star Darryl Strawberry, he said.

Actor David McKnight said friends, family and children whom Jackson has helped over the years took turns giving tributes. He said there was "a lot of food, a lot of eating, and a lot of celebration, camaraderie, holding hands, cheering and praising Michael Jackson."

Guest Katherine Rogers said Jermaine Jackson performed a song at the gathering and actor Tommy Davidson served as master of ceremonies. She said Michael

Jackson looked "relaxed."

Asked by reporters how Jackson was faring, Backerman said, "He's doing fantastic. He's doing well. He's holding up fine. He's clearly fighting mad regarding the allegations."

Backerman declined to answer further questions about Jackson's legal troubles.

As cars began leaving, passengers in one vehicle threw T-shirts reading "I support Michael Jackson" to fans waiting outside.

Jackson was charged Thursday with seven counts of performing lewd or las-

civious acts upon a child under 14 and two counts of administering an intoxicating agent. He maintains his innocence.

Jackson was looking forward to thanking people who have stood by him, said Brian Oxman, a lawyer and Jackson friend who planned to attend Saturday's gathering.

"It's for family and friends to say thank you from Michael to people he loves and who have supported him," Oxman said.

"It's not a party. It's not a pep rally. It's not hoopla or celebration."

Jackson soon will travel

to England to fulfill unspecified contractual obligations. There have been reports he will be promoting his latest CD, "Number Ones," which is doing better in the United Kingdom than it is in the United States.

Mark Beaumont, a staff writer at music magazine NME, said he doesn't expect a rapturous welcome for Jackson if he goes ahead with his visit to England.

"There will always be the hardcore fans but that is a relatively small group now and people are becoming more suspicious," Beaumont said.

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