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Natalie Portman and Hugo Weaving in *V for Vendetta*

SCARLETT YES; PIMPERNEL NO

V for Vendetta

review by George Sax

The press booklet for *V for Vendetta* doesn't contain a biographical note about Alan Moore, the writer of the comic and the graphic novel the movie is based on. He's mentioned in the publicists' text, but only his artist-collaborator, David Lloyd, got into the bio section.

This omission doubtless is due to the notably fractious Moore's repudiation of the movie's script as "rubbish," and his unmet demand not to be mentioned at all. It's also kind of ironic since the script, by the Wachowski brothers—Andy and Larry, who are also among the producers—has the awesomely mysterious, heroically insurgent title character say, "Words will always retain their power."

But *V* is adapted from a work that relies on the graphic image, often garishly fantastic, a kind of work in which this alleged power of language is yoked to pictures, and is often the secondary element. Movies are, to be sure, a visual medium too, so it might be expected that comics could easily be adapted to cinematic purposes, but the recent record of this kind of effort doesn't really bear out that assumption. The darker, more serious results of such conversions have included a number of failures, including Sam Mendes' *Road to Perdition*, and last year's *Constantine* with Keanu Reeves.

V is no such failure; it's a dexterously made, consistently involving, persistently smart work of dynamic popular art. Its matchup of ideas, words and pictures is one of its underlying assets. Moore complains that the movie screws up his vision. I don't know anything about that, but *V* works on its own terms.

The movie's *V* is the sardonically masked avenger who wages a terroristic campaign against the brutal totalitarian regime that has taken over state power in Great Britain sometime in the near future. (The U.S. is disintegrating in civil strife.) Soon after the movie begins, *V* explosively demolishes London's Old Bailey Court building to the accompaniment of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," sent out over the dictatorship's city-wide public address system. (John Hurt's "Chancellor," the supreme leader who only communicates over tele-hookups, even to his

ministers, responds, "Add that to the blacklist; I don't want to hear that music again!")

At about the same time, *V* encounters Evey (Natalie Portman), a young girl-Friday at BTN, the regime's television network, and saves her from three police thugs. When she impulsively returns the favor later, he's forced to carry her away to his manorial hideout, to keep her safe until he can pull off his grand scheme: to blow up the Houses of Parliament on November 5, Guy Fawkes Day. (The movie seems to get the historical significance of the holiday wrong.)

V is a typically fantastic comic-book character: garbed in black, face covered by a menacingly smiling ceramic mask, unarmed save for a set of knives, and executing what one villain dismisses as "karate tricks," he acrobatically and lethally dispatches whole squads of police and soldiers. He's also a techie wizard, able to commandeer the government's audio and visual facilities. Not to mention his mastery of explosives engineering.

This central conceit places *V* smack in the middle of fantastical male-adolescent fare, of course, but it is surprisingly successful at enlisting the interest of a much wider audience. This may signal the enduring influence of adolescence, but the filmmakers have done their work with impressive facility, anyway. *V* moves fluidly, even gracefully, from scene to scene, imparting them with enough wit and dramatic impact to render the move consistently entertaining. It largely succeeds in creating a convincing fantasy world, where the characters aren't so immediately preposterous that they perforate the illusion.

This is aided by the performances of a virtual album of important British character actors. These range from Sinéad Cusack as a guilt-dogged government scientist with a terrible past, to Tim Piggott-Smith (years ago, a complexly immoral figure in the BBC's miniseries "Jewel of the Crown") playing a ruthless, quietly menacing security minister.

Stephen Rea is modestly but incisively effective as the senior police inspector on *V* and Evey's trail. The movie takes on a noirish, policier flavor as he goes about his investigation amid growing, barely repressed moral qualms.

Portman had to provide the most varied, intense performance as the hunted, battered, decreasingly innocent Evey, and she has discharged her responsibilities admirably. As *V*, Hugo Weaving has to deliver his lines (most of them also post-dubbed) from within a top-to-bottom costume encasement and he comes across as lightly, amusedly mellifluous.

ous, for the most part, which is probably about as much as one could expect.

The Wachowski brothers' three Matrix pictures were too often grandiosely incoherent, but *V* (directed by James McTeigue, first assistant director on *The Matrix* trilogy) is relatively easy to follow, even as it moves rapidly from sequence to sequence. There are some lapses: the movie doesn't really explain the significance and origin of the nearly extinct red roses *V* leaves at the scenes of his crimes, and it's not clear why Evey is out violating

curfew in the movie's early minutes.

There are some other things you don't want to think about very much too, but in all its diverting cleverness, *V* has a more fundamental shortcoming: It represents an attempt at a moral and political statement imposed on a fantasy comic-book platform. The consequent product is a little unbalanced if you focus on this too intently. *V* is pop agit-prop, and it works quite well enough on that level. **av**



Neil Young in *Neil Young Heart of Gold*

OLD MAN YOUNG

Neil Young Heart of Gold

review by M. Faust

When The Who sang "Hope I die before I get old" back in 1966, it resonated with a generation that couldn't conceive of their music, to them so new, being performed by anyone over the age of 30.

Fortunately now that baby boomers are aging they've allowed their idols to grow up with them. It might be an embarrassment for Mick and Keith to still be rolling through the sports arenas of the world. But for musicians like Neil Young, who turned 60 in November, age is nothing but a blessing, deepening the pool of experience that he has always drawn on.

The man who once sang "It's better to burn out/Than it is to rust" shows that he is doing neither in *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*, a concert film of exquisite grace and heartstopping beauty.

Filed on August 18 and 19 last year at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium (former home of the Grand Old Opry), the film presents live performances of songs from Young's then-unreleased album *Prairie Wind*. The album was written and recorded in a burst of energy after Young, having just lost his father, learned that he had a potentially fatal brain aneurysm.

Fortunately surgery fixed Young up, and the reflective mood made for some magnificent music. The concert features a large cast of musicians, most of whom have worked with Young over the years, including steel guitarist Ben Keith, keyboardist Spooner Oldham, and singer Emmylou Harris (the world's best argument against hair dye).

There is also a string section, horns and a gospel chorus, but the arrangements don't try to cram every player into every song. All are used sparingly and none are ever wasted, so that we never become accustomed to them. The performance incorporates many of the influences that Young has explored over the years, with the exclusion of his electric side: those who prefer the bull goose skronk of

his work with Crazy Horse will have to settle for Jim Jarmusch's documentary *Year of the Horse*.

The songs, for those of you who like me haven't heard them before, are concerned with memory and the place of a single life in a larger context. But the closest they get to maudlin is "He Was the King," a gentle remembrance of a dog. Otherwise Young sings of lessons learned with neither resignation nor regret, but as keys to life that arrive better late than never. The most moving moment comes in "This Old Guitar," about the vintage guitar Young plays that once belonged to Hank Williams. As he sings "This old guitar ain't mine to keep/It's mine to play for awhile," the song reflects an awareness of spirituality that sent a shiver down my spine (not for the first time in the film, either).

The new songs are so good, and so pristinely presented, that I was frankly sorry when they ended and Young launched into a set of oldies, mostly from the albums *Harvest* and *Harvest Moon*.

Though it can't be denied that Young, after 40 years of performing, has a huge and worthwhile back catalogue to explore, the high point of this section comes when everyone onstage whose hands aren't otherwise occupied straps on a guitar for Ian Tyson's "Four Strong Winds," which Young aptly describes as "the most beautiful song I have ever heard in my life."

Heart of Gold was filmed by Jonathan Demme, who defined the concert film in 1984 with the Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense*. Working in Super 16mm that imparts a pleasing touch of grain to the image (digital video is far too unforgiving for weathered faces), he keeps your attention focused on the music in a manner that is precisely the opposite of the "Saturday Night Live" school of swooping cameras and machine-gun editing. It reminded me of his video for New Order's "Perfect Kiss:" his work never draws attention to itself, never takes you outside of the music, though if you make the effort to pay attention to it you can see how hard he's working to capture just the right shot at every given moment.

Heart of Gold is a movie with a limited audience; it will only be enjoyed by people who love music. **av**

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