What's Happening in Worcester

Hands-on science at The Ecotarium

BY JULIA CROWLEY
ASSISTANT FEATURES EDITOR

My wonderful offering this week, to those of you who are hungry to partake in the wickedness that is Worcester, is both educational and fun. It’s always great when you mix them together, sorta like a field trip but better because you don’t need a chaperone any more. That makes sense right?

The Ecotarium, which once went by the lowly name of New England Science Center, is a great place to "discover the wonder of the natural world." This isn’t just your regular ol’ boring museum. It includes many interactive things and live animals that you can watch all day (and you know what happens if you watch animals long enough - you think that’s your sort of thing, of course.

Over the last few years, the Ecotarium has reinvented itself and offers many new things that weren’t available when I was a kid. In addition to some standard and some not-so-standard exhibits, there is now a tree canopy walkway. This walkway is elevated day through the tops of trees. There are nature trails throughout the property and a train ride past many of the animal cages. One thing I could not find on my last visit was going to be the case of animal dung. They used to have all sorts of bronzed animal poo in a case with everyday objects so you could compare the sizes. All I know is that polar bear poop is about the size of a common TV Guide. Apparently, the museum is too good for that sort of stuff now.

Several temporary displays go in and out of the building during the year and give visitors a chance to get a glimpse on what is going on in the world, or outer space, for that matter. One popular exhibit was a recreation of the Mars Rover landing. Visitors can operate over the surface of the "planet."

For those interested in astronomy there is also a planetarium and an observatory. For a small fee, one can sit under the "stars" and learn about different constellations and stargazing throughout the seasons. Also, during the year there are several nights the museum holds outdoor events that include high tech telescopes to see planets, stars and moons. On some of these nights, there are jazz concerts outdoors where one can also get a chance to gaze at the dark sky.

Outside one can also roam around and see over 60 species of animals. Have you ever been sprayed by a bobcat? Well here is your chance. Want to see some monkeys monkey around? This is a fantastic chance to see some endangered species while they are still in existence. One favorite spot is the polar bear den. Sadly, the mother polar bear, Ursu Minor, died earlier this year, so it’s only her daughter, Kenda, that’s left. Periodically there are special programs where visitors can actually feed the polar bears, from a safe distance of course.

In addition to all this fun there is a café and gift shop so you can buy everyone you know a geode or some other fascinating object of earth science.

Hours: Monday-Saturday 10a.m.-5p.m. Sunday noon-5p.m. Admission is $7 adults and $5 for college students so bring your I.D. Directions: The Ecotarium is roughly 5 mins. From Shrewsbury St.

Go to www.ecotarium.org for more information.

Duel of the Dopplegangers

‘The One’ sells its ideas short

BY TIM O’COIN
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"The One" makes it painfully obvious that it’s trying to ape "The Matrix." We get the same cyber punk edge, the same super-reality fistfights and the same metaphysical back-story - all severely toned / dumbed down. An opening sequence, explaining the concept of a "multiverse" - several variant realities existing simultaneously - promises a mind-blowing approach to the parallel universe angle is disappointing and unsatisfying. One might think there’s plenty of room forth only as a means to get to the movie’s climactic fight sequence.

I, for one, would have liked to see more of these multiple dimensions - their history, their culture, how they differ from our own. Yet the movie offers only an abbreviated glimpse into a handful of alternate realities - our own reality and all its bland familiarity, gets the most exposure here.

It’s a shame - the peaks we do get are amusing, yet lacking in imagination. In one universe, a TV announces that President Gore has just passed a new health care initiative through Congress. For a chuckle, but all the potential avenues of exploration in an alternate existence, and the best they can do is show that Decision 2000 ended up in a way the other way? There’s also the reliance on tired stock designs for future / alternate worlds - riot gear that looks like a cross between a samurai and Star Wars, SUVs with unusual exteriors, yet still operate like any another run-of-the-mill Ford and machine guns with lights on them.

The universe described above features in the movie’s opening, where dimensional fugitive Yulaw (Jet Li) kills his alternate self, named Lawless (also played by Li), and takes down a squad of LAPD officers without breaking a sweat. He’s eventually apprehended by Roedecker (Delroy Lindo) and Funch (Jason Statham), two agents from a law enforcement organization set up to police the “Multiverse.” They return to their own dimension, a place where the existence of multiple universes is hard science fact, as is the technology allowing travel between them.

Yulaw goes on trial for murdering “himself” in 123 alternate universes. Later on, the movie explains that each individual has a counterpart in each of the other 124 universes, and all share some kind of of metaphysical energy. When one is killed, his or her energy goes to the remaining counterparts, resulting in increased superhuman smarts. Somehow, Yulaw has discovered this link between universes and has been bumping off his doppleganger to achieve superhuman powers. It’s interesting to note how the movie flies in the face of even the most outlandish scientific hypotheses by having a finite number of realities - most speculation regarding multiple dimensions posit an infinite number of realities. Why the limitation here? Well, otherwise there wouldn’t be a movie, of course - infinite universes mean infinite counterparts.

We’ve seen that martial arts films can have fully realized ideas and still manage to be thrilling, so the half-assed effort here is even more inexcusable.

The dimension hopping begins anew when Yulaw escapes his captors and flees to our reality. There, he targets his only remaining counterpart, L.A. Sheriff Gabe Law (Li again). Predictable mistaken-identity conventions kick in as Yulaw wreaks havoc and Gabe is blamed - everybody thinks he’s gone nuts except, of course, his wife. However, the bewildered Gabe doesn’t face his dimensional nemesis totally helpless. He’s been getting stronger thanks to Yulaw’s cross dimensional killing spree. Plus, he has the help of Roedecker and Funch in later scenes.

The movie handles all of these metaphysical paradoxes in a flat, matter-of-fact fashion, turning what could have been an engaging sci-fi diversion into a flimsy plot strand to connect various ridiculous action sequences together. I expected that someone inexplicably developing superhuman abilities would flat out battle, confuse and frighten friends and family, yet Gabe’s chums take almost no notice. Indeed, the frivolous treatment of the subject matter results in numerous plot holes and other logical maws. This movie could have easily benefited from another 30 minutes to flush out, at the very least, the ideas at work. At 96 minutes, it’s far too short for the concept it’s trying to develop.

Instead it’s the action scenes that, as expected, get the most attention, and all rely on probably the most braunva FX and wire work yet. Take one scene where Yulaw punches two occurring motorcyclists, leaps up, and kicks the now airborne occupants to the ground - he’s near the first couple of times, but I always had the feeling that they were verging on FX overkill. The action centerpiece, the climactic duel between Gabe and Yulaw, goes all out and, at least in part, is exactly done. However, I wish the filmmakers had lain off the extreme slow motion camera, computer-enhanced movements and fast editing, and allowed Li’s physical talents to shine (which he does indeed have, check out some of his Asian films, like “Fist of Legend” for proof). The best fight scenes are those that showcase the actor’s combat skills to the fullest, rather than attempting to wow audiences with flashy effects and wirework.

In the wake of movies like “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” and even “The Matrix,” both which raised the bar for martial arts on screen, “The One” is a flimsy piece of entertainment by comparison. We’ve seen that martial arts films can have fully realized ideas and still manage to be thrilling, so the half-assed effort here is even more inexcusable.

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