You'll laugh at *Scorpion King*'s fist-fest action

BY DAVID GERMAIN
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There are two choices on *The Scorpion King*: You can laugh AT The Rock or laugh WITH him as he poses, flexes, glowers and pile-drives his way through a string of violent dust-ups in ancient Egypt.

The safe bet is you'll laugh with him.

The Scorpion King, an offshoot of *The Mummy* franchise, is a brisk, amiably silly fist fest that establishes pro wrestler The Rock as heir apparent to Arnold Schwarzenegger for favorite on-screen bruiser.

With testosterone to spare, this is a guy's flick among guy flicks, delivering bone-crunching action, goofy humor, loads of nasty creepy-crawlies including cobras and ravenous fire ants, and a solid skin factor courtesy of scantily clad co-star Kelly Hu.

The Scorpion King flies by *quickly, nicely paced by director* Chuck Russell, who keeps the swords, arrows and punches flying in good, old-fashioned, swashbuckling style.

And critical to the movie's success, its violence is cartoonish and sanitized enough to draw a PG-13 rating so the film can pack in the early teen-age boys.

Reprising his brief role in last year's *The Mummy Returns*, The Rock stars as Mathayus, one of the last survivors of an ancient race of Akkadian assassins.

Mathayus is hired by ravaged tribes to kill the sorceress Cassandra (Kelly Hu), whose advice has helped the evil warlord Memnon (Steven Brand) drive his opponents to near extinction. Yet Cassandra proves strangely sympathetic to Mathayus, who, after a series of daring escapes from Memnon's thugs, kidnaps the sorceress and flees with her into the desert.

They wind up as allies in the fight against Memnon, aided by the Nubian behemoth Balthazar (Michael Clarke Duncan), inventor Philos (Bernard Hill) and comic-relief geek Arpid (Grant Heslov).

"After a hard day of looting and pillaging, there's no greater city than Gomorrah," Arpid proclaims as he and Mathayus approach the sinful city. "Except maybe Sodom."

The main cast is rounded out by Peter Facinelli as Memnon's villainous ally, Prince Takmet, and Olympic gold medalist Sherri Howard as Queen Isis.

Stephen Sommers, writer-director of both mummy movies, is a producer and co-wrote the screenplay for *The Scorpion King*, which has the same campy spirit as its predecessors.

Scorpion King relies far less than *The Mummy* flicks on glitzy visual effects, leaning instead on stunts, sword play and bare-knuckle combat. Watching the battle of the giants when The Rock and Duncan mix it up is almost worth the price of a ticket alone (and it's no less believable than a choreographed championship bout in the professional wrestling world).

For all the grace-on-wires of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and the slow-motion finesse of The Matrix and its many copycats, Scorpion King is a nice reversion to pure power over agility.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Friday, April 19

THE SCORPION KING
Set in early ancient Egypt, this is the story of how a peasant, who wreaks revenge on a marauding army who pillaged his village and how he eventually becomes the First Pharoah of Egypt. Known as the Scorpion King. Stars Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Michael Clarke Duncan, Peter Facinelli, Kelly Hu and Bernard Smith. Directed by Chuck Russell. (Universal Pictures) Rated PG-13.

Scheduled to open Friday, April 26

JASON X
In the year 2455, long after humanity has abandoned Earth as a lifeless planet, an expedition of archaeological students discovers a research facility where two people are cryogenically frozen: One a young woman, the other a large male in a strange mask. The ice begins to thaw, and so the students bring the bodies back to their spaceship, having no idea what they just unleashed on the future... and of course, on themselves: Jason. (New Line) Rated R

LIFE, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT
The film revolves around Lanie Kerrigan (Angelina Jolie), a feature reporter at a Seattle television station, who seems to have it all: A baseball-superstar boyfriend, a gorgeous apartment and a shot at a big network assignment. In the midst of a fluff-piece/interview, a homeless local street "seer" named Prophet Jack tells Lanie that she leads a meaningless existence, and will die the following week. When Prophet Jack's other predictions come true, Lanie begins to re-examine her life and priorities, which includes rekindling a relationship with a cameraman (Edward Burns) with whom she has long been at odds. Stephen Herek directs the drama. Other featured players include Tony Shalhoub, Christian Kane, and Stockard Channing. (Twentieth Century Fox) Rated PG-13

BIG BAD LOVE
This drama weaves together the stories of an alcoholic Vietnam vet, Leon Barlow, struggling to become a working writer and that of his ex-wife, Marilyn, who refuses to allow him to see their pre-adolescent son, Alan and daughter, Alisha, who has an incurable illness. Stars Arliss Howard, Debra Winger, Olivia Kersey and Angie Dickinson. Directed by Arliss Howard. (IFC Films) Rated R

Scheduled to open, Friday, May 3

HOLLYWOOD ENDING
Mum's the word on the plot except the fact that Woody Allen plays a Hollywood director who is hired to direct his ex-wife (Tea Leoni) in a movie. Featured players include filmmaker Mark Rydell as Allen's agent, and Treat Williams as Leon's new boyfriend, the studio boss. Lending femme support are Debra Messing (from TV's Will and Grace) and Tiffani-Amber Theissen. Allen directs the comedy, marking his first feature since completing *Curse of the Jade Scorpian* in 2001. (DreamWorks) Rated PG-13

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE
Leonide (Mira Sorvino), Princess of Sparta, resorts to deception and disguise to win the man she loves, a young prince whose throne she along the way helps restore. The only problem is that her various disguises, both male and female, end up thrice engaged. (Paramount Classics). Rated PG-13

SPIDER-MAN
Orphaned at an early age, Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) lived in Queens, New York with his beloved Aunt May and Uncle Ben. Peter led the life of a normal student, working as a photographer at the Daily Bugle under the tutelage of publisher J. Jonah Jameson, pining after the beautiful Mary Jane Watson and hanging out with buddy Harry Osborn. On a school trip, during which Peter and his classmates are given a science demonstration on spiders, Peter is bitten by a genetically altered spider. Soon after, he discovers that he has unusual powers: He is endowed with the strength and agility of a spider along with a keen, ESP-like spider sense. Featured players include Kirstin (Get over it) Dunst as Mary Jane Watson, James Franco (TV's Freaks and Geeks) and veteran actor Cliff Robertson as Peter's Uncle. (Columbia Pictures) Rated PG-13

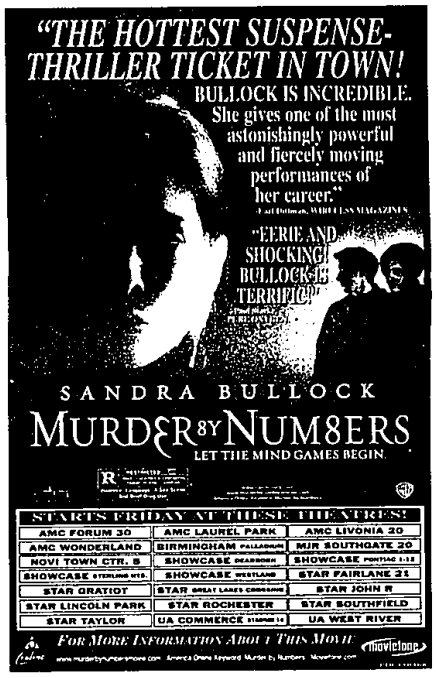
DEUCES WILD
Set in the summer of 1958, the story tells of a Brooklyn street gang, the Deuces, as they learn that loyalty and midnight rumbles can no longer protect them from the turbulent times ahead. Gunfights and honor quickly become a thing of the past as a new breed of wiseguys threaten to take control of their neighborhood. Featured among the ensemble are Fairuza Balk, Matt Dillon, Stephen Dorff, Balthazar Getty, and Brad Renfro. Scott Kalvert directs the drama. (MGM/UA) Rated R

Scheduled to open, Friday May10

THE NEW GUY
After sealing his uncool reputation with an embarrassing ninth-grade accident, a high school student decides to switch alma maters his senior year for a final stab at popularity. All goes well until his primary nemesis follows him to the new school. Featured players include DJ Qualls as the uncool student who reinvents himself as a tough guy, Lyle Lovett, Eddie Griffin and Eliza Dushku. Edward Decter helms the comedy, marking his feature directorial debut. (Columbia Pictures / Revolution Studios) Rated PG-13

UNFAITHFUL
A middle-aged wife and mother has an unexpected and torrid affair with a handsome younger man. After her husband discovers her deceit, he murders his wife's lover, and the husband and wife must face the consequences of their actions. Based on the 1969 film "La Femme Infidel", the film stars Richard Gere, Diane Lane, Olivier Martinez and Erik Per Sullivan. Adrian Lyne directs the drama, marking his first since completing "LOLITA" in 1997. (Twentieth Century Fox) Rated R

Scheduled to open Wednesday, May 16

STAR WARS: EPISODE II – ATTACK OF THE CLONES
Ten years after the events of the Phantom Menace, not only has the galaxy undergone significant change, but so have Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), Padme Amidala and Anakin Skywalker as they are thrown together again for the first time since the Trade Federation invasion of Naboo. Anakin has grown into the accomplished Jedi apprentice of Obi-Wan, who himself has transitioned from student to teacher.

The two Jedi are assigned to protect Padme whose life is threatened by a faction of political separatists. As relationships form and powerful forces collide, these heroes face choices that will impact not only their own fates, but the destiny of the Republic. Featured in the cast are Natalie Portman as Padme, Jimmy Smits, Samuel L. Jackson, Frank Oz, Ian McDiarmid, Pernilla August, Christopher Lee, and Hayden Christensen as Anakin. Directed by George Lucas. (Twentieth Century Fox) This film is not yet rated.