X Does Not Mark My Spot!

Written by Tu Phan

No matter how you look at it, the X Movie does not, and I repeat, does NOT, live up at all to its great potential. Based on the CLAMP manga series X, this movie started out with all the qualities that should have led to a great production: it had a brilliantly mysterious storyline, potentially beautiful art, awesome characters, and rockingly poignant music. With all these things going for it, the producers of this full-length animated feature couldn't possibly go wrong. Or at least that's what I thought at the beginning. Oh, how wrong I was. Far from being great, X the Movie was terrible, and not just terrible terrible, but terrible with a capital T. Despite its great plot, characters, and music, the film was lackdaisackal, slow, and in fact, downright boring. I had expected a lot from this movie, especially since it was directed by Rin Tarou, with character designs by Nobuteru Yuuki (of Record of Lodoss War fame). But, as I was to find out, the X Movie just had no vision, no driving force behind it, and this lack was pretty much evident throughout the film.

First of all, the film hardly does justice to the plot originally outlined in the manga. The story is the same, but hopelessly compressed into one day. It is the year 1999, and the fateful day of judgment has arrived. Kamui, after several years of self-imposed exile has returned to Kyoto, goaded by the dying words of his mother: "Go back to Tokyo, Kamui. Your future is waiting for you." Once there, he finds out that things have changed. The Dragons of Heaven, who want to preserve the current Tokyo, and the Dragons of Earth, who want to destroy the world, have finally gathered under the guidance of two opposing dream-seers. And it seems that both groups want him to join their own particular faction. But Kamui, however, wants nothing to do with saving or destroying the earth. He has come back to see Kotori, his childhood sweetheart, and her brother Fuma. But even meeting those two does not bring him peace. Instead, led by the dream-seer, Kamui sees a terrible fate in store for his love: Kotori will die a horrible death, killed by his very own hand. Worse, it seems that Fuma, who promised to protect him, is perhaps his deadliest enemy. Kamui finds out that he must make a choice after all. To change fate, to protect the ones he loves, he must choose one of the two paths, to save the earth or to destroy it.

The manga series focuses a great deal on this dilemma, following Kamui as he struggles inwardly over the choice. The film, however, hardly develops this classic struggle of the self at all, perhaps because of the compressed timing of the movie. There is never more than a token statement or two regarding Kamui's inner struggle.

The film also chops off a lot of the other interesting things which makes the X manga so enjoyable. For one thing, it never stops to explain the system of mystical symbols behind the magic that each of the characters seems to have. For another, it ignores many of the more intriguing subplots. For example, in the manga, there is fierce battle over the sword which is Kamui's primary weapon in his battle with his enemies. A mysterious third faction (which never makes an appearance in the movie) steals the original sword, forcing both Dragons of Heaven and Dragons of Earth to scramble after the missing weapon. The movie, however, ignores this entire subplot, simplifying it to the point of non-existence. It is not important where the sword comes from, nor do we get a hint of the pain and suffering involved behind the creation of the weapon. We never find out the tragedy that the creation of the thing brings to Kotori's and Fuma's family, nor do we ever find out how Fuma, in the movie, gets his hand on a second sword. It just appears.

The compressed timing of the movie also leads to other problems, especially with characters. The manga just barely introduces all the major characters in nine volumes. The film tries to do this in less than 97 minutes. The result: hardly any character development at all. Characters appear without delving at all into their past histories, and they seem to die off just as quickly. Fans of Tokyo Babylon hoping to see Saburu or Seishirou will be especially disappointed, since the characters don't make it past the first ten minutes of the movie.

Of course, I could have lived with the chopped-off storyline and the superficial characters if the action of the movie had been interesting. Unfortunately, the movie is unbearably slow. Characters flash in and out of dream sequences, which leads to long, floating moments where nothing is happening except the trickling of water. Worse, even in the real-world scenes the characters seem to float, with hardly any of the quick, flashing action which keeps the blood pumping. This effect of non-action is heightened even further by the terrible use of the background music. The BGM itself is dullingly slow and ponderous, which makes the fight scenes seem lackaidasical, rather than mysterious or mystical as the animators intended. On the other hand, there are moments when such slow tinkling music would have had great effect. Unfortunately, the creators don't use it then. In fact, at those points, they put no music at all in the background, which makes the animation seem unrealistic and faltering. Combined with the sometimes stiffly animated characters and disproportionately drawn characters, the action just seems stiff and totally unreal at points, something I didn't expect at all after seeing the first riveting and well-animated commercial clips for this movie.

On the other hand, there were some decent moments in the movie. The creators did a great job of adding realistic computer-drawn animation. The floating earth bubble which Kamui rides in moved and shimmered with outstanding clarity and realism, and I could have sworn that the dragon following it was real. Also, I can never get enough of hearing X Japan's wonderfully touching music. Unfortunately, the band's music isn't used at all during the course of the movie. Rather, the poignant song, "Forever Love" doesn't appear till the ending credits, after the story is practically over and done with. When you think of all the sad moments, the fierce fighting scenes, the terrible struggles between past friends that could have used this music to add that extra bit of emotion, the terrible quality of this movie really begins to hit you. When the best part of the film doesn't even appear until after the show is over, you know you're not seeing top-quality composition.

Such ineffectual film-making, of course, is totally unacceptable in my mind. The creators of the X Movie had such a great story on their hands. They could have done so much with it, emphasizing the tear-jerking emotion, the fast and fierce fighting scenes, the great and varied characters which makes the story so remarkably complex and satisfying. Unfortunately, they settled for doing a poor job, creating a story without action, pathos, or vision. Fortunately for us die-hard fans, there's always the X manga, and the hope that in the future, someone, somewhere out there will do a better job of animating such a potentially great series.