

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 107

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

'Solo' laden with generation's high expectations

Within the sacred Star Wars canon, there is "Star Wars" and "The Empire Strikes Back." Then there is everything else.

"Solo," which purports to tell the original story of Han Solo, definitely resides on the "everything else" side of the ledger.

The personality of Alden Ehrenreich's Han Solo actually resembles that of a young Luke Skywalker, a hero at the beginning of his journey. Except that Han has no Force to bolster him, no Shakespearean family drama to confuse him, no John Williams score to herald him, no light saber to defend him — no superpower at all, not even an archeologist's whip.

Ehrenreich's inoffensive protagonist hardly seems the chrysalis to the rakish fighter pilot who wooed Princess Leia. This young Solo has none of the winking irony, winsome recklessness and sheer confidence of the man he is intended to become, who will face seemingly insurmountable challenges with prickly humor, well-honed skills and a twinkle in his eye — a man whose attractiveness is based on the secret he shares with his audiences: That cynicism is a mask for sentimentality.

Even factoring for the age difference, there's a feeling of mismatch, like substituting Roger Moore for Sean Connery. This wide-eyed Han comes off as an interplanetary Huck Finn, rafting the galaxy from one peril to another, as a sidekick to Woody Harrelson's more cunning and charismatic mercenary, Beckett.

We meet Han as a teenager on the planet Corellia. He and his love interest Qi'ra (Emilia Clark,



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"Game of Thrones") are indentured to a monstrous Fagin-esque giant caterpillar, Lady Proxima (Linda Hunt), who lives in a dystopian warehouse swamp and fears light as much as the Wicked Witch of West feared water.

Han and Qi'ra plot their escape from the brackish mud-bound Corellia, but they become separated before their plan is fully consummated. "Solo" follows Han in his effort to reunite with Qi'ra.

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In his quest, Han is grudgingly mentored by Beckett and his partner in love and crime, Val (Thandie Newton); wins the loyalty of Chewbacca (Joonas Suotamo) by demonstrating his facility with the Wookiee language; and wins the Millennium Falcon from a becaped Lando Calrissian (Donald Glover) in a space-saloon game of Sabacc.

George Lucas has made known that the movie matinee serial "Flash Gordon" was his inspiration for the original "Star Wars," which, in form, is essentially a western. "Solo" even more openly embraces the Western genre, right down to a shootout atop a speeding train as it careens around a vertigo-inducing mountainside.

Christopher Miller and Phil Lord ("The Lego Movie") were originally slated to helm "Solo," but amid creative differences and cast complaints, the yeoman director Ron Howard ("Apollo 13," "The Da Vinci Code") was brought in by the producers to finish the movie, and the capable Howard has delivered a solid piece of work.

Standing alone, "Solo" is a respectable, if forgettable, summer movie. It swims apace in the flood of other superhero-in-space movies released into theaters this summer.

But "Solo" does not arrive (ahem) solo.

It is laden with a generation's worth of built-up expectations. We want our minds to be blown and for the special effects to rock us on a physiological level. Yet we leave "Solo" fully intact, our heads resting firmly on our shoulders.

There's no ringing in our ears or playful recap of snappy zingers on the ride home.

The entire purpose of "Solo" is to traverse the arc that takes young Han from Corellia to the Rebel Alliance pilot we met in the first movie of the series. Ehrenreich and Howard never quite get us there.

To deliver such conventional fare in an environment loaded with such great expectations inevitably disappoints.