SUMMER MOVIE SNEAK PREVIEW

Everything Old is New Again: Spock, Harry Potter, Ice Age, Even 3D—A Parent's Guide

by Kimberly Gadette

"Up," from Pixar, is a G-Rated 3D film that is sure to please children of any age

This summer, Hollywood turns back the clock. Old friends include Harry and Larry... Harry as in Potter, Larry as in the Night Guard. And speaking of old, there's a few dinosaurs stomping through the cinema in the latest sequels of "Ice Age," "Night at the Museum" and "Land of the Lost."

While many plots look back, the film industry keeps leaping forward, showing off its latest breakthroughs in CGI (computer-generated imagery), IMAX and Digital 3D.

If only we could wear those 3D glasses out on the beach…

May 1

BATTLE FOR TERRA

Voice cast: Evan Rachel Wood, Luke Wilson, David Cross, Justin Long, Dennis Quaid
MPAA Rating: PG for sequences of sci-fi action violence, some thematic elements

Plot: Their own planet on the brink of decimation, humans need a new home. They decide on a hostile takeover of the beautiful planet Terra, inhabited by a peaceful alien race that knows nothing of war. Coexistence would be impossible: humans would have to convert the atmosphere, which in turn would make it poisonous for the Terrarians. Thanks to an unlikely friendship between a feisty young Terrarian and a human pilot, there may be a solution after all.

Concerns: Young viewers may find it confusing that the enemy is the human race. The ET-like Terrarians are so appealing, it's disturbing when the invading humans open fire on them. A Terrarian girl's father is abducted, planes crash, and there is a running theme about the Earth's final days. Looking at the upside, this film could lead to discussions about appreciating and acting responsibly toward our planet.

May 22

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: BATTLE OF THE SMITHSONIAN

Ben Stiller, Amy Adams, Hank Azaria, Ricky Gervais, Christopher Guest, Robin Williams
MPAA Rating: PG for mild action and brief language

Plot: Stiller returns as Larry, the museum's night watchman. Like most sequels, this film's bigger than the first, with more cast, more museums (five, including the Smithsonian, never used in a major film before) and more plot, adding in a romance between Larry and Amelia Earhart. The previous simian entertainment—a capuchin monkey—gives way to hijinks from a space chimp. Along with the original funny men, Hank Azaria shows up as a wacky pharaoh and Christopher Guest does a mean

Ivan the Terrible.

Concerns: Few. The prior film's MPAA rating described "brief rude humor," which is not mentioned in this film's rating. Given that most of the ensemble is highly skilled in physical comedy, the younger audiences should find plenty of silliness to keep them engaged. Even if they get lost in art and/or cultural history, between charging dinosaur bones, the space chimp and multiple flying machines, this film looks to be a visual hit.

May 29

UP (in Digital 3D)

Voice cast: Ed Asner, Christopher Plummer, John Ratzenberger, Delroy Lindo, Jordan Nagai
MPAA Rating—Predicted: G

Plot: Called a "coming-of-old-age story," 78-year-old balloon salesman Carl Fredricksen decides to fulfill his lifelong dream of visiting the wilds of South America. His methodology is simple: by tying thousands of balloons to his home, he's up, up and away. But air travel can be a challenge, no matter the mode…and Carl's first problem occurs when he realizes that he's not alone. It seems that Russell, a sunny, slightly-dim, eager-beaver of a Wilderness Explorer who's 70 years his junior, has inadvertently become a stowaway.

Concerns: None. This 3D digital film comes from Disney/Pixar, the masters of G-rated favorites for the last 14 years, since 1995's "Toy Story." Dug the talking dog, a 13-foot jungle bird, and the vibrant palette of the piece will keep the younger crowd engaged. Plus, what kid doesn't love the magic of flying through the air? Adults will find messages on aging and loss, and following one's dreams no matter how old the dreamer.

June 5

LAND OF THE LOST

Will Ferrell, Danny McBride, Anna Friel, Jorma Taccone
MPAA Rating—Predicted: PG

Plot: Based on the 1974 television series of the same name, Ferrell's bumbling Dr. Marshall (Ferrell) and his group inadvertently become trapped in a space-time vortex. Without weapons or smarts, they have to rely on a primate named Chaka, their only ally in a world full of dinosaurs and fantastic creatures. Can they survive? If they do, will Dr. Marshall finally find respect among his scoffing scientist peers?

Concerns: With Ferrell and his sidekick McBride, the humor's bound to be extremely rude. The monsters stomping through the film could disturb the younger viewers. The dinosaur doesn't just leer; there are close-ups of saliva dripping from his mouth. A blood-sucking mosquito feeds on Ferrell's neck, swelling to nearly human proportions with blood – and is then squashed when Ferrell falls back on it. Murderous bands of big-eyed, horned lizard people (Sleestaks) draw quills from their spines, firing them like arrows. Look for borderline language, e.g., "he can suck it."

June 12

IMAGINE THAT

Eddie Murphy, Thomas Haden Church, Yara Shahidi, Nicole Ari Parker, Martin Sheen
MPAA Rating: PG for some mild language and brief questionable behavior

Plot: In this family comedy, Murphy is a financial executive who has more time for his Blackberry than his seven-year-old daughter. Problems arise when his career starts plummeting. After bringing the daughter to work with him one day, she suddenly spins fantasy stories that contain elements of inside information he desperately needs regarding stocks, companies and financial futures.

Concerns: Few. Think Murphy's earlier "Doctor Doolittle" crossed with "Bedtime Stories" and "Liar, Liar." This film is a morality tale for parents who need to be reminded to spend more time with junior. Little girls will identify with the precocious Yara Shahidi, who makes for a lovely role model; however, the younger male audience won't be as intrigued. The potential for rude humor comes from the potty-mouthed Bobb'e J. Thompson, who stole last year's "Role Models."

July 1

ICE AGE: DAWN OF THE DINOSAURS (in Digital 3D)

Voice cast: Ray Romano, John Leguizamo, Denis Leary, Queen Latifah
MPAA Rating—Predicted: PG

Plot: The sub-zero heroes from the two prior "Ice Age" films return: Scrat's still after his acorn, Manny and Ellie await the birth of their baby mammoth, Sid steals some dinosaur eggs and Diego worries that he's turning from tiger to housecat. The gang unwittingly crashes down to an underground world replete with dinosaurs, foreign plant life and a one-eyed, dino-hunting weasel named Buck. And, no surprise, Sid will need to rely on his friends for rescue.

Concerns: The two prior PG-rated films cited "minor language and innuendo" and "minor peril." Since this latest sequel has been filmed in 3D, the peril may not look as minor, especially when it involves bigger, more menacing animals threatening to devour our prehistoric friends. Kids may be confused with the concept of dinosaurs living in the Ice Age; parents might want to be prepared to offer some solid, earth science explanations!

July 17

HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF BLOOD PRINCE

Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Jim Broadbent, Helena Bonham Carter, Alan Rickman
MPAA Rating: PG for scary images, some violence, language and mild sensuality

Plot: In this sixth installment, the final battle with Voldemort is fast approaching. Rather than continuing to treat Harry as a child,

Dumbledore prepares him for the deathly conflict ahead. New character Horace Slughorn holds a valuable key to unearthing secrets from Voldemort's past. The Hogwarts students, now well into their teenage years, battle their own feelings of the heart, adding some humor to balance the darkening plot.

Concerns: Though Voldemort only makes brief appearances in flashbacks, his presence pervades the whole. (Ralph Fiennes' young nephew plays the sullen, 11-year-old version of Voldemort.) Echoing the books, each new installment reflects a darker tone as it marches toward the last volume. A recurring character that Harry Potter audiences have loved since the beginning is murdered. (On the other hand, if children have previously read the book, they won't be surprised.)

July 24
G-FORCE (in Digital 3D)

Bill Nighy, Will Arnett with voice cast of Nicolas Cage, Sam Rockwell, Jon Favreau, Penelope Cruz, Steve Buscemi, Tracy Morgan
MPAA Rating—Predicted: PG

Plot: Talk about using a film as a guinea pig: "G-Force" combines live action 3D with comedic, computer-animated guinea pigs to enact a story about covert, elite crime-fighting rodents who've been trained to infiltrate and stop evil-doers in their tracks. Bill Nighy ("Pirates of the Caribbean") plays the evil billionaire, while Will Arnett carries the human comedy as the cynical FBI guy trying to muzzle the creatures.
Concerns: Minor. Since this is Disney, it should be kid-friendly all the way. With visual effects maestro Jerry Bruckheimer as producer, the action promises to be non-stop. Tracy Morgan voices the rowdiest guinea pig of the bunch, while Penelope Cruz speaks for a seductive Mata Hari in fur. Convincing depictions of talking animals are usually a surefire hit with the younger set – this offering should prove to be relatively mild, silly fun.

July 31
BANDSLAM

Alyson Michalka, Vanessa Hudgens, Gaelan Connell, Lisa Kudrow, David Bowie
MPAA Rating: PG for some thematic elements and mild language

Plot: A music-driven teen comedy, new nerd in town Will is flattered when Charlotte, a gifted singer/songwriter, asks him to manage her off-beat trio for an upcoming battle-of-the-bands contest. She's as surprised as Will when the band develops its own unique sound, with a real shot at success. But disaster strikes and Charlotte unexpectedly quits. With Will's new-found self-confidence shattered and the contest approaching, he and the band must choose whether to admit defeat, or face the music and play.
Concerns: A subplot of first romance signifies that there will be some mild sensuality. If the music isn't a winner, and if the plot or the characters don't interest the audience, the concern will be only that of boredom.

July 31
THEY CAME FROM UPSTAIRS

Kevin Nealon, Robert Hoffman, Doris Roberts, Tim Meadows and Ashley Tisdale
MPAA Rating—Predicted: PG

Plot: Arriving at their vacation home in Maine, the Pearson family kids discover some unexpected roommates have moved in upstairs. Namely, an alien crew. (The initial confrontation between the youngest girl and the friendliest alien is a virtual steal from "ET".) But since the aliens' mind control guns only work on adults, it's up to the kids to save their parents and the rest of the world from a world-destroying invasion.
Concerns: Minor, if any. It's a kid-oriented comedy/adventure, with lots of physical comedy (look to see Grandma somersaulting through the air), pratfalls, battles on skateboards, using any household item that's not nailed down. The knee-high aliens aren't all that disturbing, even for the youngest crowd.

August 7
SHORTS

Jon Cryer, William H. Macy, Leslie Mann, James Spader, Jimmy Bennett, Kat Dennings
MPAA Rating: PG for mild action and some rude humor

Plot: 11-year-old Toe Thompson isn't happy living in Black Falls, a bland town where everyone's employed by the same company. When a rainbow-colored rock falls from the sky, he discovers that the rock is able to grant wishes for anyone who holds it. Soon, ill-advised wishes crowd the town (tiny spaceships, crocodile armies, eccentric beasts). But it's not until the grown-ups seize the magic rock that the trouble starts. Toe and his friends must join forces to save Black Falls from itself, discovering that what you wish for is not always what you want.
Concerns: Minor. The exaggerated creatures may startle the youngest audience members, but all-in-all, the children will be heartily engaged by the wacky fun of a magical neighborhood run amok.