As we do with all heavily hyped films, we dispatched our very own Mitch Cyrus to the theaters this past Friday to review "Beowulf", the latest creation of director Robert Zemeckis ... he of "Back To The Future" and "Forrest Gump" fame. The film employs new CGI technology that has been blowing audiences away, and Mitch says that visually, it's like nothing you've ever seen. How did he like the film though? Find out inside.

The technology now exists to make any tale of imagination come to life on the silver screen. What was started thirty years ago by George Lucas with "Star Wars" has evolved today into an art form where even the most mind boggling fantasy can spring to life, as was exhibited in Peter Jackson's amazing "Lord of the Rings" trilogy.

Now Robert Zemeckis takes aim at another literary classic, the Olde English epic poem "Beowulf", using the same technique of motion-capture that he employed in the holiday tale "The Polar Express". It is a cross between CGI animation (like "Shrek") and green screen computer wizardry used to place real actors in unreal sets, such as was used in "300". Visually, it is like nothing else you have ever seen. It's a cartoon...but it's not. When you see old king Hrothgar, it's not just Anthony Hopkins' voice you are hearing, but Hopkins' face and mannerisms as well.

It's a surrealistic, but slightly disconcerting experience, as the one thing that doesn't work well right now with this technology is giving the characters' eyes any level of depth and soul. They seem dead, and it's one of the reasons that you never really can connect with them in the way that you should.

The story itself is one known by pretty much everyone in America, as I haven't found anyone I've talked to who didn't have to read through it in either 8th or 9th grade. The monster Grendal is tormenting the Danes. Hero Beowulf comes from across the sea and battles both Grendal and then Grendal's mother. Later in life, he battles a dragon. The poem itself is long for its genre at 3183 lines, but not exactly novel length, either. This is where the screenwriters must come in...and where they fail miserably.

The comparisons of this film to both the aforementioned "300" and "Lord of the Rings" is inevitable...and that is where "Beowulf"'s flaws are so apparent. In those other epics about battles and sacrifice, you had heroes that you could emphasize with; fleshed out characters who let you inside of them enough to understand their motives, fears, and desires. Whether it was a reluctant, noble man who was unbeatable in battle, like Aragorn in "LOTR", or a proud, fearless warrior whose heart pined for his queen, like Leonidas in "300", we could understand and identify with these larger than life figures.

Not so with Beowulf. Why is he there, other than the love of battle? You never really know. How much of his tales of glory are real, and how much is wild boasting? Zemeckis leads you to believe that Beowulf is almost as good at spreading B.S. as he is at fighting. Even after his early success in battle, Beowulf is still a mystery, and not a sympathetic character at all. He has secrets. He has told multiple lies. And he knows that he's not the man he pretends to be, but isn't sure

how to handle it. Zemeckis evidently doesn't know how to handle it either. Consequently, as an audience member, you alternate between pulling for Beowulf as a Hero, and feeling disdain for his callous behavior, wondering why he's acting in that manner.

Now that approach may work for something like "The Sopranos", or any other mob movie...but in those cases, you know the central character isn't on the up and up to begin with. In a heroic epic, you don't really want to see that emotional ambiguity.

Perhaps if the other characters were of any interest, it might still be OK...but with one exception, that's not the case. Hopkins' King Hrothgar is a drunken, dirty old man in a bed sheet that embarrassingly opens up too often, showing the king's bare assets. Robin Wright Penn may have created the most bored animated character of all times as Queen Wealthow...it's unclear who she finds more tiresome...her husband or Beowulf. John Malkovich is also wasted as Unferth, the chancellor to the King who first acts like what you'd expect from a John Malkovich character, the sneering plotter bent on foiling the hero, and then morphing into a lackey once Beowulf prevails; before eventually turning into a firebrand holy man.

The one exception, of course, is Angelina Jolie as Grendal's mother, a cross between a serpent and Elvira...and probably the hottest animated character ever put on screen. The motion capture process works brilliantly for her character, who is not portrayed as she was in the poem, as a hellion warrior, but as a seductress with a body that would have fit right in with the cult classic "Heavy Metal". Unfortunately, despite all the trailer emphasis on her, she actually has less than ten minutes screen time, much to the detriment of this film.

Be warned...it's not a movie for the little kids, either, as it's more gory than "300". Heads are bit off, giant eyes are sliced open, and limbs hacked and hewed enough to almost satisfy Mel Gibson's bloodlust if he were making a "Braveheart" sequel.

All in all, it's a fascinating film in regards to the technology, but one where you walk out thinking about all of the shortcomings. Zemeckis loves new technology, and loves being a pioneer with it. That works well when he also has a story to tell and characters to care for, such as "Who Framed Roger Rabbit", "Back to the Future", and "Forrest Gump". When he forgets that fact, he ends up with disappointments like "Death Becomes Her" and "What Lies Beneath".

This movie could have been something truly special. But like its hero, it is too shallow to embrace.

My Rating: Tim Couch (1 ½ footballs).