It was off to the theaters again for Mitch last weekend, and this time to see X-Men: The Last Stand, which raked it in at the box office. Mitch had some very strong feelings on this flick. Did he love it or hate it? Find out for yourself ...

Almost 30 years ago, in 1978, a landmark film was created based upon a comic book hero. The movie was Superman, and it was a box office and critical hit. Two years later, the second episode was made, and it exceeded the first. The extraordinary technical effects were even better, and without the need for exposition since the characters were already established in the first movie, the script was able to delve more into the personalities, and the plot could concentrate more on the events at hand without spending time on back stories.

And then it all went terribly wrong in 1983 for “Superman III”. Convoluted plot, lazy direction, and special effects taking precedence over personal interactions resulted in a movie that was bad enough on its own…but was even worse in comparison to the brilliance of the first two.

As it turns out, the people in charge of the X-Men film franchise did not learn the lesson. After two excellent films detailing the lives of superheroes feared and hated for being different, they have delivered a loud, muddled mess in the last of

the current story arc. It is still full of amazing special effects and strange beings with incredible powers, and it can still entertain at a level much higher than superhero stinkers such as “Superman 4”, “Batman and Robin”, and “Hulk”. But one can’t truly watch it without lamenting on the missed opportunities. Bryan Singer masterfully directed the first two movies, but chose to step away from the franchise and take the helm of the revitalized Superman series with the upcoming “Superman Returns”. Replacing him is Brett Ratner, previously best known for the Rush Hour movies and Mariah Carey videos. Replacing Michelangelo with the guy that paints pictures of Elvis onto black velvet would be an appropriate comparison.

Too many cooks spoil the broth, and evidently too many mutants destroy a franchise. In the second X-Men, we were introduced to three new mutants; Nightcrawler, Iceman (who had a cameo in the first), and Pyro. With this number being so low, we were able to get to know each one of these characters; to understand not just what they could do, but who they were as individuals. In the case of Nightcrawler, Alan Cumming delivered an exemplary performance of a deeply religious man tortured by his own physical appearance that resembled a demon. In X3, we don’t get the back stories…we simply see new characters pop up, do their thing, and then disappear into the background.

The one exception is Kelsey Grammer as the blue furred Beast. The intellectual mutant serves at a Cabinet level position on the President’s staff as “Secretary of Mutant Affairs”. However, his loyalties are torn once a formula is invented by a wealthy industrialist that is touted to be a “cure” for mutants. Once they are injected with the serum, they lose their powers forever. This sends shock waves through the mutant community. Many, like separatist leader Magneto (Ian McKellen, once again adding power and dignity to his role), feel that this is the first step in the government trying to exterminate mutants. Others, like Charles Xavier, the leader of the X-Men, take a “wait and see” attitude. He can understand why some mutants would want the serum, as their powers do not allow them to fit in, and they’ve dealt with rejection their entire lives. Rouge (Anna Paquin) would definitely be in that category. She cannot touch another person’s skin without draining them of their life forces…which makes it rather hard to have

a boyfriend.

But other forces are at work, and per the usual plot devices in these types of movies, the government does end up making weapons out of the serum, and the battle lines are drawn. Confounding this is the return of Jean Grey, who was last seen being buried underneath millions of gallons of raging water as she saved the rest of her team. The end of the last movie already disclosed that she would return, and she does so with a vengeance. Unbeknownst to the viewing audience in the first two movies, Xavier had placed mental barriers in her; as her near unlimited telekinetic powers left unchecked could have catastrophic results. As a result of her trauma, the barriers are down, and she becomes a wildly unpredictable, destructive force that ends up on the side of Magneto.

And here is where the entire film jumps the tracks. Grey's transformation into "The Phoenix" is handled in a sloppy manner, including having Famke Janssen doing an encore performance of her psychotic sexpot assassin Xenia Onatopp from the 007 film "Goldeneye". Mostly, she stands around either looking confused, or having the special effects team turning her into a grotesque Medusa as she wields her powers to kill anything in her path.

But she's not alone in the butchery department, as there is more carnage in this film than you used to see in an Arnold Schwarzenegger action flick, including some major characters from the first two movies. In addition, lame plot devices are added just as an excuse for more special effects. The lab creating the serum is on Alcatraz Island, and since one member of Magneto's Brotherhood of Evil cannot swim, Magneto puts all of them on the Golden Gate Bridge, and then magnetically rips the bridge out to transport them to the island. Once there, the battle sequences, which should have been the highlight of the film, play out as a muddled, unfocused, and thoroughly uninteresting series of skirmishes. On one side, Magneto has hundreds of mutants at his service; none who truly stand out except Callisto, a mutant with super speed and an unexplained hatred of Storm (Halle Berry). The rest are just cannon fodder for the six X-Men standing against

them all in possibly the worst battle scene I've observed since Oliver Stone's dreadful "Alexander".

Hugh Jackman's Wolverine has been the soul of the X-Men, and he comes relatively unscathed here. He's one of the few to have an actual chance to show more than one emotion, as Wolverine is conflicted with his feelings of love towards Jean and the need to do whatever he can to stop her from killing even more. Wolverine has always been the best character to watch as he constantly struggles to control his inner animal…sometimes failing. Jackman is reported to be signed to star in a Wolverine movie, and it should be a solid film if the script and director are up to the task.

Other than Jackman and McKellen, only Kelsey Grammer gives a performance worth noting. Almost unrecognizable in his prosthetics, Grammer's voice is as distinctive as ever, and he is quite convincing in both sides of his character; the genius scientist Hank McCoy, and the powerful Beast. Unfortunately, the rest of the cast are either woefully underutilized, like Patrick Stewart, Anna Paquin, and James Marsden (Cyclops), or else mail in their performances. Halle Berry has made no secret to the fact that she was just in this last one for a paycheck, and it shows as she seems to just be going through the motions.

So perhaps it is time for this franchise to take a long break, and come back in ten or fifteen years with new actors and fresh scriptwriters. It worked for the Batman series with last year's "Batman Begins" breathing new life into a franchise that was all but dead. Bryan Singer looks to duplicate that feat next month with "Superman Returns", which is garnishing positive early buzz. So there is hope that one day there can be a return of the X-Men to the glory they had in the first two films, and we can forget about this abomination.

Final note: For those of you that have seen the film, you may have missed a scene after the final credits showing that a character killed in the movie was not actually dead. That this character could be brought back was not in doubt, knowing the comic book universe, but it was another failing of the director and producer to place this information after the credits where most people would not see it.

My Rating: Tim Couch (1 ½ footballs). Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.