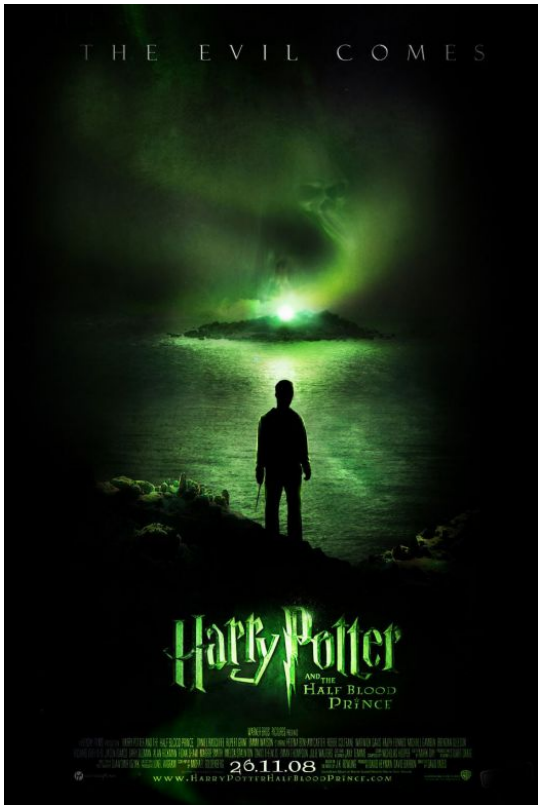

"Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince" was to be my final review of the "Summer Season" due to my semi-sabbatical (In other words, "how can we miss you if you won't go away"). After I was to complete this, I was going to stay out of the theaters for at least a month before popping back in once again to take a look at Quentin Tarantino's "Inglorius Basterds" in late August.

So I went to see Harry and the rest of the Hogwarts crew last Thursday. It's a week later, and I'm finally able to put SOMETHING to paper...but not what I expected. And that "something" is just to say that I can't truly do a fair review of this movie.

Why? Because I'm a fan. And because this series is completely unique to modern filmmaking history.

Of course I'm a movie fan. You don't become a movie critic if you aren't, unless you are truly a masochist (oh, wait. I'm a fan of Cleveland sports teams...maybe that should be telling me something). But there is a big difference between being a fan of movies, and a fan of a particular film. With the exception of the Harry Potter films, and the Lord of the Rings films, I am not a fan of a particular movie until AFTER I've seen it. There are movies I look forward to seeing, hoping that they meet the expectations I've raised in my own mind for them. Sometimes I become a big fan of these types of movies, such as "Star Trek", "The Departed", and "Sweeney Todd". Other times, I'm bitterly disappointed in the waste of potential, such as "Body of Lies", "The Taking of Pelham 123", and "The Other Boleyn Girl".

Most often, I go in without any major expectations, and become a huge fan of a movie after seeing it. "Slumdog Millionaire", "WALL-E", "Juno", "Once"...all movies that I went into totally blind, and came out of loving.

This is the sixth Harry Potter movie. This isn't a series of sequels, this is a continuation, even if each individual film has many self-contained components, they do build upon each other. This type of filmmaking is simply NOT done. Not with the same cast (sans Dumbledore). Not with kids starting as 11 year olds and staying with the characters for a total of eight movies. It is totally unique, and it may be something that we never see again.

Therefore, I knew exactly what to expect from the excellent cast and the steady hand of David Yates, who will also direct the last two. And this movie did not disappoint, in the slightest...but in truth, it would have been hard to have disappointed me.

I wasn't working as a critic during the release of "Return of the King", but if I were, I would have had this same problem. By the time you got to that final film, you were either hooked into the series or you weren't. And if you were hooked, anything short of a train wreck would have been viewed as a triumph, as it was completely "critic proof". Those critics who bashed Peter Jackson about the multiple endings that drug out for an extra 45 minutes? Philistines, I tell you! Those of us that had become enthralled by the series didn't care...in fact, after investing so much of our own time (and money) into the exploits of Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn, et al, we felt we DESERVED the long conclusion.

So it is with Harry. And in many regards, we become even more ensnared by this series than I was for Lord of the Rings. Because we've seen these kids grow up before our eyes, just like we do our own children. We've seen them mature as individuals, as well as witnessing their amazing growth as actors. It has been almost eight years since Daniel Radcliffe first flashed that impish grin that made my wife break into a spontaneous maternal 'aaahhhhh'. The boy is now an able young man. The cute, nerdy girl Emma Watson is now a stunning beauty. The goofy red-headed best friend Rupert Grint is now a strapping adult with incredible comedic chops. Where has the time gone?

Unlike Tolkien's classic, I have not read any of the Harry Potter books. At first, it was because I considered them children's stories, unworthy of my time. Now? I won't read them because I don't want to spoil any surprises at the theater. Which puts me at odds with many of the Potter fanatics who love to debate what's in the films compared to what's in the books. After the second part of "Deathly Hallows" ends, I'll make it a point to read the books. But not now. This fact also makes it impossible for me to join in the debates that rage on internet boards (like ours), contrasting the events of the book to the film version.

I also did not catch either of the first two movies at the theater. Embarrassingly, I took an immediate dislike to them, as I viewed them as "competition" to my beloved LOTR films...a truly foolish viewpoint. When I did watch "The Sorcerer's Stone" on DVD, I found it to be a charming tale told in a very entertaining fashion. I wasn't a fan...but my wife was...so since I knew that she really wanted to see it, I went to the second film "The Chamber of Secrets"...which I considered slightly better than the first, but still nothing really that blew me away.

Until 2004, when "Prisoner of Azkaban" was released. This, to me, was where the series really took off, exploring things that were far beyond what you'd see from kiddie books. At that point, I became A Fan, and I haven't looked back since.

I did review the last Harry Potter film, " The Order of the Phoenix ", as it was the first one of the series released after the founding of this web site. I don't think it's one of my better reviews. I tried being too impartial, but it was obvious that I wasn't. I also went a lot more into the plot than I normally prefer to do in these films...something that probably isn't necessary.

The bottom line is that when it comes to Harry Potter, you are either a fan of the series, which means you're going to go see it; or you are not, and you're going to continue to wonder what's

wrong with all of us. But I will try to make a couple of comments about it.

"The Half Blood Prince" is in a difficult position, being the penultimate book in J.K. Rowling's series. Most of us know, even if we haven't read the books, that "The Deathly Hallows" is going to be very intense, very dark, and very conclusive. So "Half Blood Prince" is, at its core, nothing more than a setup, or a bridge between the dark, serious, "Phoenix", and the darker, more serious "Hallows".

The setup part of the movie works very well. We see more clues being unveiled, along with new twists that are introduced that will not be solved until the series end. We also get more in depth into the older characters Dumbledore and Severus Snape, even if we leave the theater with more questions than answers.

What we mostly get is a lighter tale of adolescence, and the havoc it can wreak on even the most powerful teen wizards to pass through Hogwarts since He Who Can Not Be Named. That is the most fun of this movie...watching Hermione pine away over Ron, and Harry looking wistfully upon the now blossoming Ginny Weasley. Whether you've gone through that phase yourself in the last 5 - 15 years, or have, like me, been a parent watching their children go through it, it all plays out as completely, awkwardly, embarrassingly, wonderfully real. No other scene shows it as well as when Hermione sees Ron and Lavender Brown making out, and in that totally proper British accent states, "excuse me, I have to go vomit".

As mentioned, the acting of Radcliffe, Watson, and Grint is superlative. I was expecting that...but what pleasantly surprised me was the performance turned in by Bonnie Wright as Ginny, and especially by Tom Felton as Draco Malfoy. Draco has always been the stereotypical young antagonist of the hero; the obnoxious brat with no redeeming values whatsoever. He wasn't pure evil like "Damien", just because he wasn't that smart, or that dangerous.

This movie? Draco is a completely different villain. But one that is, for the first time, three dimensional. There is a lot more to him than meets the eye, and due to Felton's excellent work, I'm very much anticipating seeing where it goes (and no...I won't read any spoilers...I'll find out in the next two movies how the turn of events from this story affect him).

Jim Broadbent also shines in the obligatory "well respected Serious British Actor who plays a

visiting professor" role of Horace Slughorn, a semi-befuddled old teacher of potions who has a secret about Voldemort that Dumbledore desperately wants to discover.

The peripheral characters have always been crucial to Harry Potter movies...but not really this time. In fact, many of our favorite characters get very short-changed in screen time this go-around. Hagrid, Professor McGonagall, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Neville Longbottom, the Weasley twins; all aren't seen as much more than cameos. This is an unfortunate necessity, as this movie focuses on two main character themes; the passing into adulthood of the three main characters (plus Ginny and Draco), and the deeper relationship between Harry and Professor Dumbledore.

I wasn't a huge fan of the casting of Michael Gambon as Dumbledore after the passing of the great Richard Harris. But he has grown on me the last few films, and in this one, he really makes the role his own. This Dumbledore must be so much more than the kindly great-grandfather figure depicted in the first two movies, and Gambon's performance of a not-so-frail old wizard reminded me very much of Ian McKellen's portrayal of Gandalf (without being a knock-off in any form).

So, not surprisingly, I'm giving this movie a Brian Sipe (3 ½ football) rating. Mostly now, I'm just waiting for the next two films...but don't let that take away from the enjoyment of this one. We've seen the children grow...now we need to see them take that last step into adulthood.

I may not be able to review them like I should...but I can certainly enjoy them.