

ARTS

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Will Smith stars in a post-apocalyptic fantasy where most of humanity has been killed by disease. On the plus side, he gets to have Manhattan all to himself

Curing the world of humans



I Am Legend
CERT 15, 101 MINS

After the over-population purgatory of Christmas shopping there's nothing like a good post-apocalyptic fantasy where humanity has been wiped out like vermin. In the opening scene of *I Am Legend* we see Lt Colonel Robert Neville (Will Smith) driving through a lifeless post-plague New York City at top speed, armed with a hunting rifle. No crowds, no congestion charge, no speed cameras; he could even light up at the wheel if he wanted to.

Not that a Will Smith character would smoke, of course. America's premier black matinee idol only plays successful African-Americans who are still in touch with their roots. Neville is a virologist and army officer, a family man with, as always, a light-skin black

wife, a cute child in his arms and a dog (in *Independence Day* it was a Retriever, here it's a German Shepherd, but still, they must make these identikit Will Smith family units somewhere in California) – and a love of Bob Marley who, he points out, tried to eradicate racism and prejudice like it was a disease.

That was in his previous life, that is, back in 2009 when the healthy citizens of New York were evacuated and the rest left to rot in the plague zone, the disease being an unfortunate by-product of a new cancer drug. Now it's 2012, and cancer is thankfully a thing of the past, but only because humans are infected with a variant that has reduced them to rabid monsters who hunt and kill the immune one per cent.

The lone survivor in New York seems to be Neville, who wanders around Manhattan with his dog Sam, talking to mannequins in shopping centres and kidnapping the city's only other residents, the disease-ridden vampire-zombies, so that he can experiment on them in order to find a cure.

Briefly we see flashbacks to his previous life, except the cinema-goer does not really need flashbacks, since *I Am Legend* is one of those movies

where visual aids are not in any way ambiguous – we see pictures of a young girl, Neville smiling with his family, and a copy of *Time* magazine lying around with the headline "Robert Neville, virologist and Lt Colonel in American army", just in case we get confused by a plot that features two characters, one of whom is an Alsatian.

This is the third screen adaptation of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel and a lot has happened in the 30 years since

In a post-apocalyptic New York there are no crowds, no congestion charge – you can even light up at the wheel

the last version, *The Omega Man*. Over-population and global warming have caused a large sector of the western intelligentsia to hunker down as the plague on Mother Earth and to long for a Dr Krippin to cure the world of us.

One of last year's best-selling non-fiction books was Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, a look at how

nature would "recover" were humans to cease; *I Am Legend* is a sort of overblown documentary version with zombie-vampires. Still, as non-misanthropes might argue, if a forest is beautiful and there is no one around to see it, is it still beautiful?

And a world without us would get rather boring after a while. Despite the benefits – such as being able to afford a four-storey house in Manhattan, hunting antelope in Times Square or firing a machine gun in the middle of the street – loneliness is hell. And so Lt Colonel Neville, when not testing antidotes, broadcasts the loneliest ham radio programme on earth, inviting survivors to join him.

One day a couple of stragglers turn up, just in the nick of time. Along with her edge Ethan, Anna is convinced by stories of a survivors' colony in Vermont, and informs Neville that "God told me He has a plan." Just the kind of opening gambit one would like to hear from the last other adult on earth. Neville informs her that not only is there no such city, but there's no God either.

And so the film connects one modern fantasy (de-population) with that oldest of American ideals, the City on a Hill, except this time the saved are escaping not from Archbishop Laud and Charles I but from plague-ridden, blood-sucking zombies.

How I finally woke up to Nutcracker's magic



The Nutcracker

ROYAL BALLET, ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

The *Nutcracker* seems such a permanent fixture of Christmas that it's hard to believe that its status as the Yuletide entertainment de rigueur did not come about until the 1960s when Balanchine's production for the New York City Ballet captured America's imagination and ignited a global craving. I've often found it puzzling for *The Nutcracker* seems by a long distance the poorest sibling of the Tchaikovsky and Petipa/Ivanov triptych. Unlike *Swan Lake*, which gives the prima ballerina her ultimate showcase, or *The Sleeping Beauty*, which offers every bejewelled splendour known to ballet, *The Nutcracker* has no plum role, no sophistication, no mystery, no sexual friction. I find the sanitised E T Hoffmann fairy tale utterly

Not palpating with anticipation when I arrived at Covent Garden for the Royal Ballet's 274th performance of the ballet, I thought the highlight of the evening would be 42-year-old Miyako Yoshida's final appearance as the Sugar Plum Fairy. Deeked out in sparkles from head to toe, she looked every inch the exotic queen of the Kingdom of Sweets. In her 12-year career as a principal dancer of the Royal Ballet, Yoshida never developed the voguish six o'clock leg lifts, blinding multiple turns or the dramatic lubris that creates media darlings or audience favourites, but her greatest strength, as Ninette de Valois once said of Margot Fonteyn, is her complete lack of weakness. In a role where no acting is required, Yoshida displayed all the virtues that make her an exemplary classical dancer – pure, unadorned lines, squeaky-clean footwork, spot-on musicality, all shot through with a deceptive ease and a disarming smile. As the new generation of dancers continues to place athletic prowess at the heart of their training, there will be fewer dancers like Yoshida who have an understanding and respect for schooling, tradition and the all-important Royal Ballet accent.

I had not expected that Yoshida's 10 glorious minutes on stage would merely provide the icing on the cake of a revelatory *Nutcracker* experience. The magic of the ballet had at last worked on me. It crept up near the end of Act One, after the inter-

minable Christmas party where kids fought one another for presents; after Clara (exuberantly danced by Johna Looke) had been given a toy nutcracker by a magician (my father, after the Freudian Christmas tree in Clara's dream had grown five-fold in the famous transformation scene; after the Nutcracker came alive to lead the toy soldier in defeating the army of rats; after Clara killed the king rat by smacking it (him?) on the head with her slipper.

Lying lifeless in one corner was the Nutcracker toy, ostensibly killed by the rats. A few feet away was an inconceivable Clara, who had just lost her Christmas present-cum-regiment captain. We know what was to come – an evil spell had been broken by the toy awake to become a handsome prince (danced by the very handsome Ricardo Cervera). It was also at this precise moment that the audience's collective heart-strings were tugged. First came a blank blackcloth that suddenly altered reality but an unspecified, timeless, abstract space. Then Tchaikovsky cued the harp, introducing one of his most profoundly beautiful of melodies – first affectionately stated by the winds and the brass, then lasciviously answered by the low strings. This was the Tchaikovsky at his best: through a simple rising motif he at once captured the sense of hope, youth and yearning of the two youngsters, yet the dark instrumental colours and shadowy harmonies hinted at an undercurrent of magic, tradition and history that are beyond the grasp of the two characters on stage.

Out of this glorious music came a spellbinding dance for Clara and her prince. He, elegant and gracious, bowed his head and deferred to his every arabesque, leap and turn. She was lifted in restraint and humility. She, shy and not a little frightened, hunched forward and opened around her new-found Prince Charming. Their excitement at discovering one another quickly escalated. She followed his first steps and then they traversed the stage with a series of union leaps. The music, too, soared upwards in pitch and volume, reaching a majestic climax punctuated with festive cymbal clashes.

The second act is sheer confusion. Confusion for Clara and her prince are taken by the magician on a tour of the Kingdom of Sweets. How quaint, refreshing, and whimsical are the just-drooping-in-PC-dances of Manchurian China, salty Arabia, burly Russia, and picturesque Andalusia! The foil to Yoshida's fairy was Federico Bonelli, an Italian dancer of noble bearing and refined technique. I found myself sitting back, taking it all in. If you let it, *The Nutcracker* could just be the path through which childhood dreams could be re-captured.

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Step into the light

THEATRE REVIEW
Anthony McCall

SERPENTINE GALLERY, LONDON

There aren't words to describe the extraordinary beauty of Anthony McCall's installations. Following his return to the art world after a 20-year break, the Serpentine Gallery is offering a retrospective.

McCall's installations in the 1970s were concerned with turning cinema into sculpture by removing the camera and the screen from the set-up. McCall turned projected images, suspended in the space between projector and wall, into film by directing a smoke machine at the beam, creating solid, three-dimensional shapes which hung in the air. These light forms changed shape, but slowly: the effect of lengthening the duration of movement, according to the artist, "deconstructs" the audience, breaking up groups of observers into individual spectators.

McCall has returned from his break with disarming continuity, although now he uses digital cameras and computer software to generate the effects previously created by film. His focus is the body: not in the conventional, corporeal sense, but apprehended relationally, as an exchange of forms. McCall's genius reveals itself through his understanding of the relationship between light and shape. The now infamous *Line Describ-*

ing a Cone remains one of the most significant post-war studies of perceptual boundaries. It's certainly one of the most recognisable avant-garde installations.

A McCall showing is more of an event than an exhibition. To step into a room where a film is showing is to "be inside" the art. You can choose when to enter and when to leave. There is no discrete beginning or end to the experience: the slow "cycles" of shape-shifting prevent us from viewing the sculptures chronologically.

Participation is key to understanding and enjoying his work. A McCall audience creates its own art since it is encouraged to interact physically with the sculpture. Critics describe the formation of an "activated matrix" – the immersion of an audience in movement – that redefines the relationship between space and object.

Between You and I presents a pair of light cones with their own independent rules of motion and change. Over a cycle of 30 minutes, these rules are exchanged as each case assumes the formal properties of the other. It is more complex than his previous work, but still recalls the elegant majesty of Albert Speer's Cathedral of Light effect and Richard Serra's *Fulcrum* (the huge sculpture behind Liverpool Street station). It also emphasises the sensual properties of light, creating white lines that snake coquettishly over the observer's body.

I spoke with Anthony McCall on the occasion of this exhibition. I wanted to ask him if there was a philosophical or ideological agenda behind his installations – he said not. The ethereal effects his installations create remind me of Michelangelo's heavens, and I've always wondered if he had such a thing in mind. He said: "Many people describe such an effect, but I wouldn't know how to 'create' a sensation like that. It's a by-product of what I call the plumbing decisions; timing, and so on. I'm preoccupied with the practicalities of construction." In any case, he doesn't share his quasi-religious experience of his art. He said: "I find some of the forms exhilarating. I get pleasure from them."

The titles that McCall uses – the immersion of an audience in movement – are startlingly vague. *You and I*, *Horizontal (III)*, for instance, raises questions, not least about the pronoun referents. "Those terms are intended to be undefined, and as vague as possible: the 'I' could be me, you, whoever," McCall said. "But my art is always about you the observer, never about me the artist. It's not about what I think."

I've often heard McCall speak of "asking the audience to turn around". In this case, I hope you'll do so in the direction of the Serpentine – but make sure you've a few hours to spare. You won't want to leave in a hurry.

Milo Andreas Wagner

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