

REVIEW

Revving engines, thrills and drama drive ‘Duster’ and ‘Motorheads’

BY ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times

After humans, and arguably before dogs and horses, there is no character more vital to the screen, and more vital onscreen, than the automobile.

Driven or driverless, the car is the most animated of inanimate objects, sometimes literally a cartoon, with a voice, a personality, a name. Even when not speaking, they purr, they roar. They are stars in their own right - the Batmobile, the Munster Koach, James Bond’s Aston Martin DB5, K.I.T.T. (the modified 1982 Pontiac Trans Am from “Knight Rider”), the Ford Grand Torino (nicknamed the Striped Tomato) driven by Starsky and Hutch. They might represent freedom, power, delinquency or even the devil. Whole movies have been built about them and the amazing things they can do, but even when they aren’t jumping and flipping and crashing, they play an essential role in helping flesh-and-blood characters take care of business.

Perhaps in some sort of reaction to our enlightened view of the effects of our gas-guzzling ways, two new series fetishizing the internal combustion engine arrive, Max’s “Duster,” now streaming, and Prime Video’s “Motorheads,” premiering Tuesday.

Created by J.J. Abrams and LaToya Morgan and named for the supernaturally shiny cherry-red Plymouth the hero drives, “Duster” is stupid fun, a comic melodrama steeped in 1970s exploitation flicks, with a lot of loving homage to period clothes, knick-knacks and interior design.



Keith David, left, and Benjamin Charles Watson in “Duster.”

The driver is Jim Ellis, played by Josh Holloway, in what reads like a turn on Sawyer, his charming, criminal character from Abrams’ “Lost,” topped with a shot of Matthew McConaughey.

Jim, a man who has never bothered to make a three-point turn, works out of Phoenix for Southwest crime boss Ezra Saxton (Keith David, monumental as always), picking up this, delivering that. The first delivery we see turns out to be a human heart, picked up from a fast-food drive-through window, destined for Saxton’s ailing son, Royce (Benjamin Charles Watson). Along for the ride is little Luna (Adriana Aluna Martinez), who calls Jim “uncle,” though you are free to speculate; her mother, Izzy (Camille Guaty), is a big-rig trucker - trucking being another fun feature of ’70s pop culture - who will find cause to become a labor leader.

The Ellises and the Saxtons, also including daughter Genesis (Sydney Elisabeth), have history - Jim’s father, Wade (Corbin Bernsen), served with Ezra in World War II, and his late lamented brother had

worked for him as well. Saxton is the sort of bad guy with whom you somehow sympathize in spite of the violence he employs; there’s genuine affection among the families, though one is never sure when or where a line will be drawn, only that one probably will be.

Into Jim’s low-rent but relatively settled, even happy world comes FBI agent Nina Hayes (Rachel Hilson, sparky), fresh out of Quantico and ambitious to make a mark. As a Black woman, she’s told, “No one’s clamoring for an agent like you,” but she’s been assigned to Phoenix “because we have no other options.” She’s partnered there with cheerful Navajo agent Awan (Asivak Koostachin), as if to corral the minorities into a manageable corner, and assigned the Saxton case, regarded as “cursed” and so intractable as to be not worth touching.

Which is to say, agents deemed not worth taking seriously - along with underestimated “girl Friday” Jessica (Sofia Vassilieva) - have been thrown a case deemed not worth taking seriously. This is a classic premise for a procedural

and strikes some notes about racism and sexism in the bargain, not out of tune with the times in which it’s set, or the times in which we’re watching.

Nina, who has managed to gather evidence of Jim crossing state lines to deliver the heart, which was stolen, and that Saxton may have been responsible for his brother’s death, bullies and tempts him into becoming a confidential informant. Thus begins an uneasy partnership, though their storylines run largely on separate tracks in separate scenes.

“Lost” was not a show that bothered much with sense in order to achieve its effects, and “Duster,” though it involves a far-reaching conspiracy whose payoff plays like the end of a shaggy-dog story, is a show of effects, of set pieces and sequences, of car chases and fistfights, of left-field notions and characters. These include Patrick Warburton as an Elvis-obsessed mobster named Sunglasses; Donal Logue as a corrupt, perverse, evangelical policeman; Gail O’Grady as Jim’s stepmother, a former showgirl who doesn’t much like him; LSD experiments; absurd puzzles (also see: “Lost”); an airheaded version of Adrienne Barbeau (Mikaela Hoover), with the actual Barbeau, a queen of genre films, making an appearance; Richard Nixon (in a few creepy seconds of AI); an oddly jolly Howard Hughes (Tom Nelis) in his Kleenex-box slippers; and a “Roadrunner” pastiche.

Though not devoid of genuine feeling, it’s best experienced as a collection of attitudes and energies, noises and colors. Don’t take it any more seriously than it takes itself.

The opening titles are super cool.

“Motorheads” is a familiar sort of modern teenage soap opera but with cars. For reasons known only to series creator John A. Norris, the whole town is obsessed with them, and along with its human storylines, the series is a tour of automotive entertainments - drag racing, street racing, ATV racing, go-kart racing, classic car collecting. I have no idea whether this will resonate with the target demographic, but there is much I cannot tell you about kids these days.

As is common to the form, our young protagonists - Michael Cimino as Zac and Melissa Collazo as Caitlyn - are new to town, having been brought back from New York City by their mother, Samantha (Nathalie Kelley), to the oxymoronically named Rust Belt hamlet of Ironwood, where she was raised, and which is the last place anyone saw their father, Christian (Deacon Phillippe in flashbacks), 17 years earlier. He’s an infamous local legend, admired for his skill behind the wheel; aerial footage of Christian threading his way through a cordon of police cars as the getaway driver in a robbery keeps making its way into the show, though if you live in Los Angeles, you see this sort of thing on the news all the time. Marquee name Ryan Phillippe plays the kids’ Uncle Logan, who runs a garage that apparently does no business, but he has love and wisdom to spare.

Though at the center of the series, Zac’s storyline is a little shopworn, not just his wish to become, almost out of nowhere, Ironwood’s top speed racer, but his textbook interest in rich

girl Alicia (Mia Healey), the girlfriend of rich boy Harris (Josh MacQueen), a Porsche-driving bully who is also hurting inside - so feel free to get a crush on him, if that’s your type. More interesting is sister Caitlyn, who prefers building cars to racing them and is perhaps the series’ most emotionally balanced character.

She becomes friends with shop classmate Curtis (Uriah Shelton), tall and good-looking, whose criminally inclined older brother, Ray (Drake Rodger), will become a sort of dark mentor to Zac. With the addition of Marcel (Nicolas Cantu), the archetypal “geek who becomes the hero’s best friend,” who works at the diner his father (grieving, drunk) used to own and dreams of designing cars, the four constitute the show’s outsider band of good guys.

They’ll have their not-always-happy business with each other - being teenagers, you know, things happen - and with their elders, as their elders will with one another. The past is not past in Ironwood; old feelings will resurface and old plots unravel. (And no one knows what happened to Christian.) Except for the cars sprinkled on top, it’s old stuff, not very deep, but produced with an engaging naturalism that rounds off the narrative extremes, enhances what’s commonplace and makes “Motorheads” easy to watch. (Colin Houtl is the sensitive director of photography, it’s worth mentioning.)

Drive on.



Tim Robinson, left, and Paul Rudd star in “Friendship.”

REVIEW

‘Friendship’ captures Tim Robinson’s brand of humor

BY FRED TOPEL
UPI.com

It makes sense that *I Think You Should Leave* creator and star Tim Robinson’s first starring movie is from arthouse studio A24. *Friendship*, in theaters Friday, captures Robinson’s unique sketch comedy aesthetic and makes it work as a coherent film.

Robinson stars as Craig, a man who befriends his neighbor Austin (Paul Rudd) when he returns a misdelivered package. The friendship opens Craig’s world to new experiences and the benefits of relationships.

This rapport is cut short after Craig behaves inappropriately in front of Austin’s other friends and

at Austin’s workplace, leading Austin to tell Craig he doesn’t want to be friends anymore. Austin ending the relationship only sets Craig off further.

Even before Craig ruins the friendship in an over the top way, his behavior with his family and at work is awkward in the distinct way that led to classic sketches from *I*

Think You Should Leave, including “Coffin Flop” and the Hot Dog Car Crash.

The way Craig interrupts his wife Tami (Kate Mara) with reassurances as she speaks at a cancer support group is the definition of “cringe comedy,” because it is clearly not the time. At work, he fills his coffee cup right to the top and walks slowly

to the meeting to avoid spilling any.

The family dynamic has weirdness too, with Craig and Tami’s son Sammie (Jack Dylan Grazer) showing more affection toward his mother than is appropriate. Craig drastically shifts from being goofy and awkward to screaming intensely, as Robinson often does on his sketch comedy show.

What makes these aspects work in a narrative film is that writer/director Andrew DeYoung tracks the long term consequences of this behavior beyond six- or seven minute sketches.

Other movies about adult friendships have also gone in dark directions, such as *The Cable Guy*, or the relatable comedy *I Love You, Man*, also starring Rudd. Even more movies celebrate man-children and reward the characters by not forcing them to grow up.

In *Friendship*, the world around Craig reacts appropriately to his inappropriate behavior. So whereas an Adam Sandler character, or Bill Murray before him, would endear himself to the audience, Craig just digs himself deeper and deeper.

Austin seems like an idealized fantasy at first, although it becomes clear that may just be Craig’s imagination. But, Austin shows Craig activities he’s never known before, and accepts Craig’s quirks like buying all his clothes from the same obscure retailer, or Craig’s random nosebleeds.

Austin’s other friends are not so patient, and the reaction of Austin’s wife, Bianca (Meredith Garretson), shows she wants Craig to leave. That’s Robinson’s whole vibe, the name of his show.

There is room in the

story for sketch-like scenes. Many comedies have subplots about the protagonist needing to make an important pitch at work to win the big client, but in this movie that presentation becomes a classic Robinson overreaction.

Craig creates just as many problems for himself by trying to recreate his activities with Austin but solo. Craig’s attempts to be whimsical take very dark turns, and Tami expresses what it’s like to be married to a person like him.

DeYoung seeds the film with a number of recurring gags that get funnier every time they’re called back, including Craig’s favorite clothing line, a themed meal at a local restaurant, and his obsession with avoiding Marvel spoilers.

A lot of movies starring Rudd have the characters sing retro pop music, like in *Anchorman* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, and *Friendship* is no exception. The choice for the group sing-along in the film is impeccable.

The path from sketch comedy to movies is fraught and takes the right match of comic personality to material. A world of more Tim Robinson vehicles in between seasons of *I Think You Should Leave* would be pleasing indeed.

Fred Topel, who attended film school at Ithaca College, is a UPI entertainment writer based in Los Angeles. He has been a professional film critic since 1999, a Rotten Tomatoes critic since 2001, and a member of the Television Critics Association since 2012 and the Critics Choice Association since 2023. Read more of his work in Entertainment.