

MOVIES

# Is the 'Star Trek' franchise fading?

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"Star Trek Beyond" succeeds in ways many of the film's predecessors have not. Playfulness is at an all-time high, with loads of inside jokes, and James T. Kirk swashbuckles in a manner he hasn't in ages -- if ever.

"Rebooter" extraordinaire J.J. Abrams, who was behind last year's "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," handed the director's chair over to Justin Lin of "Fast & Furious" fame. Though there isn't a hot rod to be had, Lin acquits himself quite well. (Spoiler alert: There is, however, a vintage motorcycle that gives Kirk, as played by the pitch-perfect Chris Pine, his biggest act of derring-do.)

It is now a full-throttle, fun-filled, action-packed film series, a "Star Trek" 2.0 that's as giddy a delight as "Guardians of the Galaxy."

The best news about "Star Trek Beyond"? You don't have to be a Trekkie to have a darn good time watching it, even while a good few jokes will be lost on you.

The bad news? Well, there have been some casualties since the last was released. Anton Yelchin, who played Chekov every time out for Abrams, lost his life when accidentally pinned by his own vehicle against a metal mailbox in California. And Leonard Nimoy, the original Mr. Spock himself, passed away at the age of 83.

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Screenwriter Simon Pegg -- "Scotty" in the series -- acknowledged Nimoy's passing by killing off Ambassador Spock (the older version played by Nimoy). It was a melancholy moment that present-day Spock Zachary Quinto pulled off with aplomb, even while handily accepting the torch three films back.

The question is: Will all this affect the box office take, and if so, how? The short answer, honestly, is no. The 13th film in the durable franchise, "Beyond" is bigger than that, just as -- tragically -- "Fast and Furious" is bigger than the passing of its considerably bigger star, the late Paul Walker. "Star Trek Beyond" made an impressive \$60 million this past weekend, coming in No. 1 at the box office. And it has a healthy 86 percent ranking from fans on Rotten Tomatoes.

It didn't hurt that "Beyond" was released during San Diego Comic-Con weekend. Geekdom is at an all-time high during Comic-Con weekends, and for those who can't make them, they celebrate by taking in flicks such as this.

Interestingly, a panel discussion involving "Star Trek," which was moderated by the show-runner for a new "Star Trek" series debuting on CBS in January, devolved into a conversation about creator Gene Roddenberry's optimistic vision of the future.

"He wanted to show that we had moved on, that the characters evolved," said actor Michael Dorn from "Star Trek: The Next Generation," adding, "There were a lot of guys who didn't like Klingons, still. But they learned a lot about each other."

Speaking of Klingons, is Idris Elba playing a distant relation to one in "Beyond," masterfully camouflaged by state-of-the-art makeup and simultaneously chewing up the scenery? His skilled performance is a sight to behold, with his dialogue resonating -- especially as far as today's civil discord is concerned.

"He's very much a Trump or one of the Brexiters," co-writer Simon Pegg told the New York Daily News of Elba's villain character.

Further, it is certainly bittersweet to see Yelchin as Chekov for the final time, and when a teary-eyed Spock (Vulcans cry?) clenches a photo of Ambassador Spock, the sorrow is palpable in the theater.

But "Beyond" goes beyond its humble origins as a much-maligned series, long before its rebirth on the big screen and subsequent re-imaginings in TV land (Scott Bakula anyone?). It is now a full-throttle, fun-filled, action-packed film series, a "Star Trek" 2.0 that's as giddy a delight as "Guardians of the Galaxy," which many theatergoers enjoyed despite not knowing that source material either.

For the record, Abrams has said Chekov will not be recast down the road, that "[Yelchin] deserves better than that."

It's a sweet sentiment from the filmmaker, especially in a day and age when actors are swapped out without so much as a flinch when playing popular characters (such as Mark Ruffalo and Edward Norton as The Hulk).

That said, through the magic of CGI, and previously unseen footage, my bet is we'll see more of Yelchin as Chekov anyway, and maybe even Nimoy as Spock. Why wouldn't we? After all, Spock has died before.



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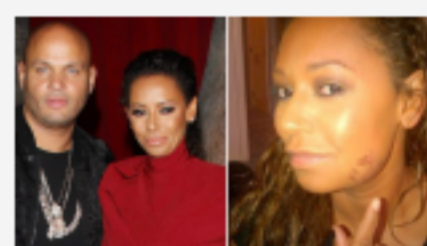
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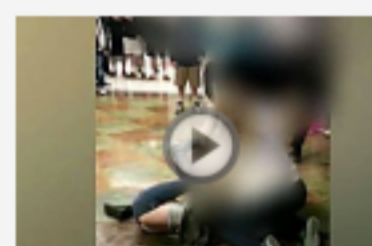


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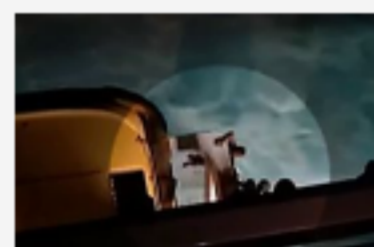
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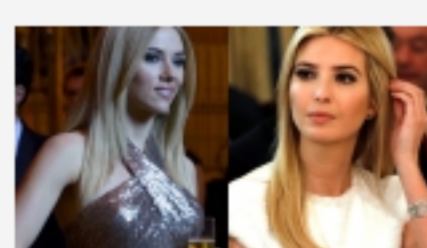


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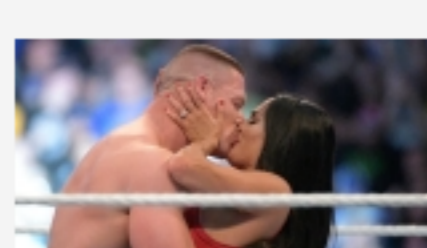


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