

November 22, 1995

FILM REVIEW:

There's a New Toy in the House. Uh-Oh.

TOY STORY

Directed by John Lasseter; written by Joss Whedon, Andrew Stanton, Joel Cohen and Alec Sokolow, based on an original story by Mr. Lasseter, Mr. Stanton, Pete Docter and Joe Ranft; supervising technical director, William Reeves; supervising animator, Mr. Docter; edited by Robert Gordon and Lee Unkrich; music by Randy Newman; produced by Ralph Guggenheim and Bonnie Arnold; released by Walt Disney Pictures.

Running time: 81 minutes.

This film is rated G.

WITH THE VOICES OF: Tom Hanks (Woody), Tim Allen (Buzz Lightyear), Don Rickles (Mr. Potato Head), Jim Varney (Slinky), Wallace Shawn (Rex), John Ratzenberger (Hamm), Annie Potts (Bo Peep), John Morris (Andy), Erik Von Detten (Sid), Laurie Metcalf (Mrs. Davis), R. Lee Ermey (Sergeant), Sarah Freeman (Hannah) and Penn Jillette (Television Announcer).

By JANET MASLIN

Raised high above his humble station, Mr. Potato Head is now movie royalty, a star of the sweetest and savviest film of the year. The computer-animated "Toy Story," a parent-tickling delight, is a work of incredible cleverness in the best two-tiered Disney tradition. Children will enjoy a new take on the irresistible idea of toys coming to life. Adults will marvel at a witty script and utterly brilliant anthropomorphism. And maybe no one will even mind what is bound to be a mind-boggling marketing blitz. After all, the toy tie-ins are to old friends.

It's a lovely joke that the film's toy characters are charmingly plain (Etch-a-Sketch, plastic soldiers, a dog made out of a Slinky) while its behind-the-scenes technology, under the inspired direction of John Lasseter, could not be more cutting edge. It's another joke that this film begins with human characters who have the flat, inexpressive look of toys. A boy named Andy is seen playing boisterously with Woody, his favorite cowboy, whose features remain innocently blank. Only after Andy gets bored and goes elsewhere does Woody spring magically to life.

With a voice supplied wonderfully by Tom Hanks, who leads this film's stellar vocal cast, Woody is instantly sympathetic. His prime spot in Andy's good graces has made him first among equals within the toy community, the civic leader who runs events like "Tuesday night's plastic corrosion awareness meeting." And all this has made him genially smug. Using a Tinkertoy canister for his podium, Woody enjoys the perks of his power, including the attraction it holds for a Little Bo Peep doll. "What do you say I get someone else to watch the sheep tonight?" she inquires.

But Woody gets a surprise with the opening of Andy's birthday presents, in an extended sequence that is one of the film's major marvels. The toys stage a reconnaissance mission to the living room, led by little soldiers who hide in the leaves of a houseplant as if this were a jungle. With the help of a walkie-talkie,

data on the birthday gifts is relayed back to Woody, who isn't worried by Andy's new lunch box. However, Buzz Lightyear, the boastful new astronaut who takes over Woody's place on Andy's bed, is something else again.

With this buoyant introduction, "Toy Story" is off and running, spanning a remarkable range of moods and backdrops without ever venturing far from Andy's room. A Pizza Planet restaurant with a memorably clever vending machine (franchise alert: this is the niftiest theme restaurant since Jackrabbit Slim's in "Pulp Fiction"), a gas station, the house next door and some neighborhood streets are enough to keep this film constantly varied. In addition, "Toy Story" shows off a superb sense of utility as it spins out adventures attuned to each toy's individual talents. There's a terrific chase sequence in which the Slinky stretches, the radio car drives, the muscleman flexes, and so on.

As for the rivalry between Woody and Buzz, it too keeps the film sparkling in believable ways. When Woody starts feeling competitive with this new plastic sibling (and when Andy's cowboy bedspread subtly switches to an astronaut motif), it's easy to sympathize with his worries.

"Will Andy pick me?" he asks the eight ball, when Andy's mother decrees that only one toy can come on a car ride.

"Don't count on it," the eight ball typically replies.

Many a children's film would let the Buzz-Woody feud turn nasty, but "Toy Story" is better than that. It does an admirable job of exploring the tensions between these two, especially when both are captured by the fiendish boy next door, whose room has a heavy-metal decor. Even the mutant toys in this dark setting are eventually shown to be enchanting. And spending time in their presence is enough to drive Buzz to a creatively staged breakdown. Dressed in an apron for a little girl's tea party and addressed as "Mrs. Nesbit," he babbles hysterically in a Kirk Douglas voice that suits his big, dimpled chin. A joke like that plays cheerfully to adults without forgetting to amuse children.

The strong cast of "Toy Story" includes Tim Allen, posturing manfully as Buzz; Wallace Shawn as a neurotic and actorish dinosaur; John Ratzenberger as a wisecracking piggy bank; Jim Varney as the Slinky dog; R. Lee Ermey as commander of the toy soldiers, and Don Rickles (who also has a role in "Casino") as the caustic Mr. Potato Head. Randy Newman and Lyle Lovett sing a genial duet over the closing credits, and Mr. Newman wrote the film's easygoing score. Thanks to exultant wit and so many distinctive voices, "Toy Story" is both an aural and visual delight.